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Cultural and Theological Influences on Religious Engagement with Digital Media during COVID-19: A Comparative Study of Churches in Poland and Ireland

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Abstract: This article investigates how cultural context and theological ideas shape the integration of digital media in religious practices. Focusing on Poland and Northern Ireland/The Republic of Ireland, we explore the diverse strategies employed by religious institutions in utilizing digital media. The study centers on the Catholic Church, analyzing its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in different cultural contexts. Examining various denominations specific to each country, we highlight the role of theological assumptions in shaping the use of digital platforms within religious contexts. This comparative analysis provides insight into the complex interplay between culture, theology, and technology, contributing to the understanding of how religious institutions adapt to societal changes and navigate the digital landscape. Our findings reflect the theological controversies of shifting religious practices and services to digital media, and point to the non-voluntary aspect of adjusting to the pressures of deep mediatization in both cultural contexts.

Keywords: deep mediatization; religion; Poland; Ireland; COVID-19; digital media



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1. Introduction and Literature Review

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several facets of the entanglement of religion and new communication technologies, digital media in particular, became more visible globally—in Europe and beyond. Due to lockdowns and restrictions, in most European countries, in-person gatherings were drastically limited, and churches were often closed for weeks or months on end, which fostered the process of digitalization of religious services (Ganiel 2020). These difficult circumstances led several churches and religious and spiritual communities to experiment with digital media to bring various activities into virtual reality: from livestreaming of religious services, to remote Bible study schools or meditation groups, to holding assemblies and business meetings via Zoom or Teams. For some churches and communities, this transition was easy, as they had been using digital media for numerous purposes way before the pandemic (Hall et al. 2023). But for most, this involved solving various technical, social, and theological problems. To move into the digital sphere was not simply about finding a new space for the community and its activities; this required rethinking how to formulate a religious message in this new situation, how to maintain a sense of community among isolated individuals and, in doing so, maintain the integrity and fidelity of their own theology and tradition.

A review of the literature about the changes that religion underwent during the COVID-19 pandemic from various European countries, including Sweden (Liu 2021), Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Ganiel 2020), Italy (Ricucci and Bossi 2022), Spain (Sabaté Gauxachs et al. 2021), the Czech Republic (Lipková and Jarolímková 2023), Germany (Schlag et al. 2023), and Poland (Boguszewski 2022) and across various Christian and non-Christian religious traditions shows that discussions about the possibility of online church gatherings intensified. Some religious groups saw these government restrictions as a violation of religious freedom, while others considered the theological implications of

participating in rituals (Chow and Kurlberg 2020). The adoption of digital technology by churches was significantly influenced by the digital readiness of society, church leadership, and members, as was particularly evident in Catholic and Protestant churches in English-speaking countries. The results deepen the analytical framework of Heidi Campbell (2010), who emphasizes the interaction of religion and technology. While few churches explicitly theologized the use of digital technology, their actions and deliberations were largely in line with the theological principles of their respective traditions. This underlines the inherent connection between faith and technological adaptation and calls for a rethinking of the intensification of deep mediatization at all levels of religious organization: from individuals to communities to religious institutions.

Deep mediatization (Hepp 2020) is a constructivist concept focusing on the relationship between digital media use, different domains of society (such as education, politics, religion, etc.), and the transformation of communication. It points to the fact that through digital media use, there has been a profound change to the content and form of communication at all levels of society, from micro to macro, all of which lead to cultural change (cf. Kopecka-Piech 2015). The quantitative dimension of mediatization pertains to the increasing number of devices, connections, and available technologies, while the qualitative aspect refers to the intensification of these connections, their omnipresence, and related phenomena such as datafication and surveillance possibilities. Deep mediatization, like its origin concept of mediatization, is a metaprocess: it affects all elements of society, but it cannot be analyzed empirically in its “pure” form. In order to understand the workings of the process, selected segments of society, or figurations, must be investigated instead. The constructivist perspective on mediatization focuses on what individuals, communities, or larger entities do with the media, rather than on what the media *do* with them. For the purpose of our study, this perspective—while not warranting generalizations—is helpful to understand the theological and cultural assumptions behind certain forms of digital media use during the pandemic.

The deep mediatization of religion during the pandemic had several facets. In purely quantitative terms, the intensification of deep mediatization of religion (cf. Hall and Kołodziejska 2021) meant that, within churches, more online services were offered. Several churches bought new equipment to stream their services and had to train people how to use it, which required considerable expense. The mediatization of religion also brought about qualitative changes and challenges—while digital media is typically presented as more inclusive and accessible to various vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities), its use contributed to the exclusion of some church members, in particular the elderly and individuals living in remote areas with poor internet connections (cf. Campbell 2023). A notable shift occurred in the dynamics between low-level clergy and the hierarchical structure within religious organizations. With restrictions on gatherings, lower-level clergy assumed a more central role in direct pastoral care, offering support and guidance to congregants through digital platforms and remote interactions. This period saw increased autonomy for lower-level clergy in decision-making processes, adapting quickly to the evolving needs of their communities.

The pandemic also affected how the churches perceived the role of digital media within organizational and theological settings, forcing religious institutions to reflect on how to craft and distribute their message in the altered circumstances and find ways to maintain the involvement of church attendees when they were unable to attend services in person. Churches underwent a paradigm shift, acknowledging the necessity of digital platforms for outreach, worship, and maintaining connections with their congregations during times of physical restrictions. The pandemic catalyzed a re-evaluation of the technological landscape, urging churches to explore innovative ways to merge traditional theological values with digital media to ensure continuity in religious practices and community engagement.

The vast majority of works on the topic depict the intensification of mediatization of religion as a result of a voluntary effort to transfer sacrum into the digital world. The reaction to pandemic-related restrictions and the ensuing shift to digital media is typi-

cally described through the lens of the churches' actions or the actions of their leaders. If problems are perceived, they are related to technical issues or knowledge limitations. What is not discussed enough in the literature is the resistance from the hierarchy and the clergy, the mistrust of the faithful. And, above all, no account is taken of the theological contingency in which the individual churches operate and determine the field of acceptable solutions. Theological constraints regarding the implementation of digital media raise significant problems within religious contexts. Some theological debates question the authenticity of spiritual experiences mediated through "virtual reality" (Doyle 2021). Concerns emerge regarding the sanctity of physical spaces traditionally designated for religious practices versus the potential displacement or alteration of these spaces in the digital realm (Oorschot 2022). The theological debate also grapples with the blurred boundaries between the material and the spiritual, considering the impact of digital reality on the perception of sacred rituals and religious symbolism. Additionally, questions arise about the potential detachment from community and shared physical experiences, posing challenges to the communal aspect of religious worship fostered in traditional congregational settings.

Another common theme among the analyzed works is that they typically (with some exceptions, including Hall et al. 2023) focused on one country and/or one religious community rather than comparing them. There are some quantitative reflections on how followers reacted to the digital transition of religion, highlighting for instance that the pandemic encouraged followers with loosening ties to institutional religion to abandon it altogether (Lefebvre 2022). A similar comparative angle is generally missing from qualitative studies.

The article aims to explore the influence of both cultural context and theological ideas on the entanglement of religion and digital media. It seeks to answer the question of how do specific cultural traditions and underlying theological assumptions shape the strategies and approaches these institutions employ in utilizing digital media? How do varying cultural and theological factors influence the integration of digital platforms within religious contexts? To address these questions, we will examine instances of the intertwines of digital media usage in religious practices in Poland and Northern Ireland /The Republic of Ireland, considering various churches and denominations. By opting for the Catholic Church, the dominant religious institution in both nations, we aim to analyze how the same organization reacted to the pandemic in different cultural contexts. The inclusion of distinct denominations specific to each country and contrasting them with the Catholic Church will underscore the significance of theological assumptions in shaping this process.

2. The Pandemic Context

In Poland, the first case of infection was identified on 4 March 2020, marking the commencement of comprehensive measures aimed at curtailing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. On 14 March 2020, a series of restrictions were implemented, encompassing the closure of educational institutions, national borders, and the imposition of travel bans, with exceptions for individual journeys. The limitations extended to public gatherings, imposing a cap of 50 individuals, including religious services. Various establishments such as schools, cinemas, sports clubs, restaurants, and bars were shuttered, leaving only essential services. An appeal was directed toward employers to facilitate remote work, and the official declaration of a state of epidemic occurred on 20 March 2020. Throughout April 2020, there was a gradual easing of restrictions until the onset of the second wave in October 2020. Notably, in 2020, cemeteries were closed for four days during the All Saints holiday. The third wave started in March 2021, prompting the introduction of new restrictive measures. Most restrictions were lifted in May 2021, only to face the fourth wave in October 2021. The transition from an epidemic state to a state of epidemic threat occurred in May 2022. On 1 July 2023, the state of epidemic emergency was lifted in Poland (Rabiej-Sienicka and Kołodziejaska 2023).

In the Republic of Ireland, a national stay-at-home order was introduced on 12 March 2020, initially closing schools, colleges, and nursery schools for three weeks. In the face of rapidly increasing infection rates, it was decided to close most public institutions, including

churches. These were some of the strictest regulations in Europe. In the summer of 2020, restrictions were partially loosened, while the wearing of masks was made compulsory. In October, regulations were tightened again, loosened temporarily over the Christmas period. In January 2021, the first wave of vaccines was launched. This was followed by the partial opening of schools, followed by other institutions, including churches. Another wave of infections in December 2021 and January 2022 forced the government to tighten restrictions for a short time. In March 2022, the obligation to wear masks was lifted (Ni Dhonaill and Ganiel 2023).

3. Materials and Methods

The material was collected and analyzed using qualitative text analysis methods (Mayring 2014, 2022). Qualitative content analysis aims to investigate large amounts of text qualitatively and systematically. In accordance with the chosen methodology, the first step was to determine the content of the corpus of texts to be analyzed. We chose to analyze documents from religious organizations and the daily press published in Poland and Ireland. These two countries were chosen because of their similarity in terms of religion, their location on the periphery of the European Union, and the fact that they have undergone accelerated modernization in the last three decades.

In the second step, we defined the time span and selected the churches for which documents were analyzed, along with the press titles. We analyzed the official documents and public statements from the period 1 March 2020–30 March 2023 published by: (1) the episcopate of the Catholic Church in Poland (accounting for 87.6% of the total population and 96% of the population of people with recognized religious status) and Ireland (78.3% of the population of Rep. of Ireland and 45.7% of Northern Ireland identify as Catholic), with two dioceses in Poland (Diocese of Tarnów and Archdiocese of Łódź) and four dioceses in Northern Ireland and the Rep. of Ireland (Diocese of Dublin, the Diocese of Down and Connor, and The Diocese of Limerick the Diocese of Derry). The selection of dioceses was based on the criterion of maximum differences. (2) The main Protestant Churches from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (The Church of Ireland, The Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Church represent 3% of the population in the Republic of Ireland), and (3) The Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church represents 0.41% of Poland's population. The second group of analyzed material comprised publications (articles, interviews) in major daily and weekly newspapers published in Ireland and Poland related to the aforementioned religious organizations. In Ireland, these included the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News*, *Irish Times*, *Sunday Independent*, and *Sunday Life*. The Polish magazines comprised *Fakt*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Niedziela*, *Gość Niedzielny*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and *Wiadomości Polskiego Autokefalicznego Kościoła Prawosławnego*. The subject of the analysis was texts in which the words "religion" and "COVID" or "pandemic" appeared simultaneously.

Following Mayring (2014, p. 95), in the third step, we chose deductive coding procedures for qualitative content analysis. The advantage of the relatively structured approach of deductive coding is that it allows different researchers to obtain comparable results even if the documents are in different languages or text types. After selecting the codes, the team ensured that each coder had the same understanding of the meaning of the code in order to constitute an intercoder consistency procedure. A codebook (cf.: Rabiej-Sienicka and Kołodziejska 2023, Appendix 1) was prepared. A coding test was then decided upon to ensure that each researcher could code in the same way. The team selected a text, coded it using the code tree, and then checked and discussed it among the researchers. This process was repeated three times until no significant difference in coding was found. Although the researchers used the same code tree in order to maintain the comparative perspective as an objective, new individual codes related to the specific context of each country could be created.

Finally, from the various forms of interpretation of the coded material, we decided on a summary, the aim of which was "to reduce the material in such a way that the essential

contents remain, in order to create through abstraction a comprehensive overview of the base material which is nevertheless still an image of it" (Mayring 2014, p. 64). The material is presented on a country-by-country basis in order to do justice to the cultural context and to adequately describe the organizational context.

4. Results: Churches in Poland and Ireland Adjusting to Digitalization

4.1. Poland

The years of the pandemic in the Catholic Church in Poland were a difficult period of constraint, and simultaneously, a significant time of digital transformation of various church institutions. At the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, the President of the Episcopate initially called for an increase in the number of masses so that there would be fewer people in churches (Gądecki 2020a). He concluded with an unequivocal call to stay at home during a TV message on the 14th of March 2020 (Gądecki 2020c)—and all of this occurred within one week. The reduction in the number of worshippers in churches was due to the government's introduction of an epidemic emergency (Ordinance of the Minister of Health of 13 March 2020 on the declaration of an epidemic emergency in the territory of the Republic of Poland) (Minister Zdrowia 2020).

The traditional media, i.e., television and radio, had been the main vehicle for the transmission of the Catholic Church's masses. Mass had been broadcast on public radio since the 1980s. The Catholic Church in Poland has a stake in the extensive system of local radio stations, one national radio and one television station, where Mass and other religious ceremonies had been broadcast before the pandemic. Since March 2020, we saw an increase in the number of transmissions through these channels. New was the fact that some parishes started YouTube or Facebook channels for broadcasting. Some bishops, including the Bishop of Tarnów, in their decrees, encouraged the priests to ensure—wherever possible—that Mass was broadcast from the parish as a means of strengthening the unity of the faithful with the parish (Jeż 2020).

However, it should be emphasized that the mediated way of participating in Mass was generally reserved for the sick or those who, because of their age, could not attend Mass in person. The Code of Canon Law says that when it is not possible to participate in the liturgy, "it is recommended [...] that they devote themselves to prayer for a suitable time alone, as a family, or, as the occasion permits, in groups of families" (Canon Law 2023, 1248 § 2). This means that the broadcasting of the Sunday service is neither the only nor even the first choice in experiencing Sunday when unable to attend Mass. This raised the question of the validity of participating in a Mass broadcast via different media (TV or internet). The president of the Episcopate, in justifying the decisions made regarding the giving of dispensations and the televising of masses, invoked divine will: "He [Jesus] wants us to be healthy (...)" (Gądecki 2020b). The church, taking care not to deprive the faithful of the opportunity to receive the Holy Communion, made it possible for Mass participants through TV, radio, or internet transmissions to receive Holy Communion later, at the appointed times in the church (Gądecki et al. 2020).

The general assurances of the Catholic Church hierarchy about the importance of participation in Mass were accompanied by discussions that aimed to give a deeper theological justification for the new situation. Father Andrzej Draguła, one of the prominent clerics acting in the public sphere, claimed that in the case of media transmission, one cannot speak of active participation (*participatio actuosa*) (Draguła 2020). In the documents of the church, the most common terms used are "spiritual union" or "spiritual communion," or, alternatively, "participation at a distance." Also, the hierarchy's attitude toward spiritual communion was varied. This concept has a long theological history, for St. Thomas already distinguished between sacramental and spiritual ways of consuming Christ's body. The relationship between the two was clarified by the Council of Trent, which established that spiritual communion was a way of participating in the Eucharist whenever objective reasons prevented in-person participation in the sacrament (Costa 2012). After Vatican II, which emphasized the need for personal participation in the sacrament, spiritual commu-

nion was marginalized to some extent until the pandemic, when Pope Francis “invited those viewing the livestreamed Mass to find the Lord in prayer. He recited the spiritual communion prayer and then exposed the Blessed Sacrament for Eucharistic Adoration at the end of the Mass” (Mares 2020). But Archbishop Gądecki, the President of the Polish Episcopate, in his televised message, cautioned: “Although they can receive spiritual communion, they are unable—due to sanitary rigours—to attend Mass and sacramental communion. They can watch and listen to television broadcasts, internet radio broadcasts, thus overcoming invisible walls, but all this is no substitute for the richness of personal encounters. It is impossible to transmit the faith, hope and love conveyed by the living liturgy of the church” (Gądecki 2020c).

The temporal asynchrony enabled by the media was also an issue: can one attend a recorded Mass to the same effect as a live broadcast Mass? The recommendation of the Bishop of Tarnów was that broadcasts should not be archived and made available (with the exception of the preached word of God), as they only make sense as a “live” broadcast. Moreover, religious services can only be broadcast on the condition that they take place without the participation of the faithful (Jeż 2020). As a result, paradoxically, there were parishes, for example, in Bielcza (Tarnów diocese), which before the pandemic had made audio recordings of every Sunday available for download, but now these files were no longer accessible, and only live transmission of the Mass was available (Parafia Bielcza 2019).

Online instructions were created in the church on how to participate spiritually in Mass through live transmission. They included notes on appropriate dress, place, and posture (kneeling, standing, sitting) facing the cross. The Archdiocese of Poznań made a professionally prepared instructional video available on YouTube (Archidiecezja Poznańska 2020), one national Breakfast TV show also invited a priest to talk about this topic (Pytanie na śniadanie 2020), and a parish in Gdynia published instructions on its website (Parafia św. Judy Tadeusza w Gdyni 2020). There were also some media discussions about Catholic home altars. This practice, used by some faithful, widened its circle during the pandemic. The parish in Golkowice encouraged people to upload photos of “their little home churches” and share them on its fan page, saying “unable to attend Mass, let us try to cultivate or reawaken the custom of family prayer at home altars” (Parafiagolkowice.pl 2020). Therefore, the setup of home altars and the rearrangement of living rooms to accommodate live Mass transmission points to the reformulation of the meaning of sacred space through digital media use (cf. Evolvi 2022), and the concomitant theological discussions.

The Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (PAOC), due to the restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, asked the Board of Directors of Polish Television (public television) to be able to broadcast Orthodox liturgies. This practice lasted from March 2020 to June 2021 and included two state-owned channels. Temporary permission was given for Mass broadcasting over the Internet. In response, a few parish fan pages were set up during the pandemic. Online broadcasts of masses on the YouTube platform were occasional. Transcripts of these broadcasts are still available online (Podlasian 2020). However, in comparison with the Catholic Church, the PAOC’s attitude to the virtualization of the Mass was generally more hesitant. According to the superiors of the church, even in a situation such as a pandemic, tradition must come first; any changes in liturgical rules are seen as a blurring of faith and surrender of trust in God to the needs of the moment. In one message, the Holy Council of Bishops informed that all services “should be celebrated according to the Lenten schedule” (Holy Council of Bishops 2020). It is impossible in the Orthodox Church to celebrate the liturgy without the faithful. The doctrine also does not include the possibility of spiritual communion, meaning that it must take physical form in an Orthodox church. In later messages, the Holy Council made no further reference to the pandemic.

The issue of broadcasting Mass unexpectedly sparked a discussion within the Catholic Church regarding privacy protection concerns. According of the Copyright and Related Rights Law, consent is not required for the dissemination of images if individuals are part of a larger context, such as a crowd, landscape, or public event. Given the relative rarity of live streams of Holy Mass online in Poland until now, the Catholic Church Data

Protection Office issued guidelines on monitoring churches and chapels out of concern for potential regulatory violations. These guidelines recommend marking places of worship with pictograms indicating surveillance and informing worshippers prior to the start of a Mass or service about the recording. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of refraining from showing images of worshippers during transmissions, especially during significant moments such as the reception of Holy Communion. Furthermore, it advises against posting recorded Mass online for later playback (Kloch 2021).

Before the pandemic, TV and internet broadcasts of funerals were uncommon. They mostly took place for celebrities, artists, and public figures. The pandemic widened, to some extent, the scope of such broadcasts to include Catholic funeral ceremonies of the faithful. In response to this, companies were set up to produce material from the ceremony (e.g., pogrzebyonline.pl). Funeral Mass was also made available by parishes on their websites. A remnant of the pandemic era are the cameras permanently installed in the church, broadcasting content without interruption (e.g., Saint Barbara's Church in Bytom). This has limited the necessary activities for the broadcasting of funeral Mass to informing about the streaming website.

In the Catholic church, the issue of remote communion additionally arose in the context of The First Holy Communion. Children, at the age of seven or eight, first attend appropriate courses, then at a solemn Mass, in festive white clothes, receive their First Communion. Since First Communion is an accession to a sacrament, spiritual communion cannot be invoked. The children should receive a physical host. The celebration of First Communion varied according to the stage of the pandemic. Most Polish dioceses issued special announcements recommending that First Communion ceremonies be held in small groups or individually. Bishop Romuald Kaminski, Ordinary of Warsaw-Praga, in his Communiqué on Preparation for First Holy Communion, noted that the time of the pandemic and the conditions in the country meant that, although online religious instruction was not a major challenge, it was difficult to effectively implement spiritual preparation for the sacraments. Faced with these circumstances, pastors were called to seek new ways of formation. Many dioceses published downloadable materials for First Communion. The most widely shared and reproduced materials were those prepared by the Catechetical Department of the Diocesan Curia in Pelplin, rather than original creations ([Wydział Katechetyczny Diecezji Pelplińskiej 2020](#)).

The use of social media to participate in the pilgrimage is an interesting approach, especially in the context of the restrictions caused by the pandemic. A message from the Metropolitan Curia of Lodz in August 2020 ensured that daily communication with pilgrims on foot would be possible through online broadcasts and social media. Although the pandemic has reduced the physical presence of participants in celebrations, it has at the same time increased their reach through online broadcasting. In the context of the Jubilee of the 100th Anniversary of the creation of the Diocese of Lodz, only selected delegates were able to participate in the celebrations. The Metropolitan of Lodz therefore encouraged participation in the celebrations through broadcasts on YouTube channels ([Ryś 2020](#)).

As the above-described cases show, both churches were careful to use digital media during the pandemic. Characteristically, after the restrictions were lifted, the Episcopate of the Catholic Church turned to the faithful, leaders of movements, and associations “who had built up a ‘domestic Church’ during their social isolation, to now return whole families to the churches” ([Episkopat Polski 2020](#)). This would indicate that these changes and transitions to the digital sphere were perceived by some church leaders as temporary—a necessary adjustment that should be replaced with the “real” religious experience as soon as possible.

4.2. Ireland

Following the occurrence of the first fatal cases of COVID-19, the government of the Republic of Ireland decided in March 2020 to restrict public assemblies, including religious ones ([Wikipedia 2020](#)). The main churches of Ireland—the Catholic Church, the

Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Church—adapted to these regulations and suspended the public celebration of religious services, prayer groups, Bible study groups, and other activities. Rituals where physical participation was required, such as weddings and baptisms, were postponed. As the state of isolation was prolonged several times, and it became clear that it would last longer, churches and religious groups began to look for ways to transfer religious life into the online sphere that suited their needs, technical capabilities, and, most importantly, was in line with their theological foundations. In general, it proved relatively straightforward for all Christian churches to make it possible to participate in services by means of online transmission (McGarry 2020). Public broadcaster RTÉ News Now started daily coverage of the Catholic Mass, and individual Catholic parishes and Protestant churches began, whether through YouTube or Facebook, to broadcast services¹. Some services were recorded using private phones, and the recordings were then made available to the faithful through various platforms.

For physical or theological reasons, not every ritual or its segment can be transferred to the digital world. In the case of religious services, only those who are physically in the church can take communion. But the act of communion itself is interpreted differently. Each of the four main Christian denominations has taken a different stance toward communion and have incorporated the act into online participation in the service, with significant implications for the religious meaning of such participation.

In the Catholic Church, reference is made to spiritual communion, but in contrast to Poland, the Irish bishops have, since the beginning of the pandemic, emphasized that through spiritual communion, watching Mass is a way of engaging more deeply with the ritual (Brennan 2020). The faithful, in accordance with the recommendations circulated on some diocesan and parish websites, after being spiritually prepared and taking the right attitude, were to recite a short Saint Alphonsus Liguori prayer during Mass (St. Oliver Plunkett Parish n.d.). The instructions did not specify when the prayer should be recited, nor did they recommend that the faithful change their posture, e.g., kneel during the Elevation or stand during the Gospel reading. In sum, watching online Mass, together with appropriate prior preparation and combined with the recitation of prayers (spiritual communion), was depicted as giving a deeper religious meaning to the act of watching Mass on a TV or computer screen.

A different approach was taken by the Methodist Church in Ireland. The Rev. Dr. Heather Morris, the General Secretary of the church, allowed people who watched the online broadcast of the service to participate in the Eucharist by receiving communion prepared at home, using their own drinks and food. The only condition placed on the faithful was that there must be time synchronization. Consequently, receiving communion while watching a pre-recorded religious service was not allowed.

In contrast, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland rejected the possibility of receiving online communion altogether and was sceptical about the value of streaming the service. In justifying this position, reference was made to the Protestant tradition of rejecting the mediation of an institution (the church) in the administration of sacraments and emphasizing the community of the faithful, meeting face to face, in the manner of the apostles. According to Drew Gibson of the Union Theological College in Belfast, for Presbyterians, the opportunity to gather together for communion is crucial: “When we’re all separated you just can’t have that togetherness. The actual physical presence is really quite important. Simply sitting in church, looking round and seeing all of these people of different ages, different backgrounds, different states of health, different nationalities and saying we’re all in this together, is quite important” (Meredith 2020).

In the Catholic Church in Ireland, like in Poland, the issue of communion additionally arose in the context of the First Holy Communion. In 2020, there were no clear guidelines on how to organize the ceremony under pandemic restrictions. Some parishes postponed it, while others opted to organize it with very limited family participation and social distancing. In isolated cases, a hybrid approach was chosen. For example, in Lusk, north of Dublin, at the initiative of the local parish council, following an online course, parents

collected communion individually from the parish and took it home. When the day of communion arrived, all the children sat in front of the screens and remotely attended Mass until they received communion from their parents' hands (Irish Examiner 2020). As the local parish priest said: "It gave me a real sense of what the early Catholic church must have been like, when people gathered for mass in each other's homes" (RTE 2020). In subsequent years, however, this solution was no longer applied, because it was problematic to hand over consecrated communion to parents on a larger scale.

As it turns out, it was not the restriction of service attendance, but of the ability to attend funerals that caused the biggest stir in the Irish society. As part of the pandemic restrictions in March 2020, the government also ordered that the number of funeral attendees be limited to 10 people (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government 2020). It was also recommended that funeral ceremonies be condensed to a short service, preferably celebrated directly in the cemetery. The display of the body at home and the organization of a wake after the funeral were forbidden. This caused a public outcry: "These regulations mean that the grieving family do not have the normal comfort and support of friends and neighbours to carry them through the difficult days of the death and burial of a loved ones" (Bell 2020).

It is important to realize the significance of funeral ceremonies in Christian Irish culture. The Irish funeral, rooted in Roman Catholic tradition, follows a traditional pattern. It is a communal farewell, rooted in the way families and communities experience bereavement. The coffins with the deceased are placed in the house for a short time. The whole community usually pays its respects. Visitors offer condolences, share memories, and may say a prayer. A funeral is an important social event, usually attended by a large number of family, friends, and neighbors. News of the death is broadcast on local radio, newspapers, and on RIP.ie², a widely used online obituary platform.

Combined with Ireland's system of cultural codes, the pandemic brought an increased fear of death and a need to commemorate those who died, whether as a result of the COVID-19 virus infection or not. Particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, when there was still a lot of uncertainty about the threat posed by the virus, the need to "tame" death through rituals was strong. Very quickly, funeral companies introduced online broadcasts of funerals. This possibility also appeared on the RIP.ie platform. The Irish Association of Funeral Directors estimates that during the pandemic, between 90 and 95 percent of funerals were live-streamed (Dooney 2023). This form quickly proved insufficient in the face of the proliferation of other encounters in the digital space. The event that attracted media attention and gave rise to a discussion about the meaning and practice of funerals during the pandemic was the funeral of Betty Ryan from the village of Ballyferriter. Betty was a well-known person in the local community and her death, the first after the introduction of lockdown, presented neighbors and family with the problem of holding a bereavement and saying goodbye to the deceased in an appropriate manner. One resident made a post on Facebook in which she suggested an idea "to honour Betty and her family by lining the road from the church in Buailtín to the cemetery" (Cotton 2020). The post was commented on and shared extensively, as it was an opportunity to manifest grief, to express sympathy, and support the idea. On the day of the funeral, as the procession passed through Ballyferriter, residents stood along their homes in the street. The whole event was broadcast on social media, with expressions of sympathy for the family in the comments (Buailtín 2020).

Another example of the creative entanglement of religion and new communication technologies is pilgrimages. In the early days of the pandemic, the regular program of the Assumption Day at Knock and the Reek Sunday pilgrimage to the summit of Croagh Patrick was suspended and major shrines such as the Sanctuary of St Patrick, Lough Derg, County Donegal, were closed. Knock is known for the Three Day Pilgrimage, during which "pilgrims agree to undertake the pilgrimage programme of prayer and quiet reflection in bare feet, keeping Vigil and maintaining the Fast" (Buailtín 2020). In 2021, with the pandemic regime still in place at Knock Shrine, it was decided that online pilgrimages should be organized. From April to May, each Sunday was reserved for the diocese or a

selected pilgrimage group, who could submit petitions online on the shrine's website. At a designated time, Mass would begin, which was broadcast on the YouTube channel and Facebook profile (Knock Shrine 2021). Broadcasts were open to the public, but a specific group for whom a date was reserved was highlighted during the Mass and sermon.

The issue of pilgrimage was originally approached by Prior Fr. La Flynn of Lough Derg Shrine, who announced on his Facebook profile (Lough Derg 2021) that he organized "Do Lough Derg from wherever you are", i.e., a pilgrimage that he will make on location, while registered people undertake it at a convenient place. A detailed program of the three-day pilgrimage was also prepared. Those enrolled had to get ready in advance to participate and also to prepare a place where they could go barefoot (a characteristic element of the pilgrimage in Lough Derg), pray, and fast (without sleep), i.e., as in the original location. A small space that could be circled was sufficient for this. A key element in including the dispersed pilgrims in the pilgrimage community was the digital connection through which the Fr La Flynn pilgrimage was broadcast, enabling praying together at pilgrimage stations and participating in the online Mass.

5. Conclusions: The Many Faces of Entanglement of Religion and Digital Media

Our research shows a clear boundary between the traditional forms of media and newer digital media. The former, which include television and radio, have long broadcast services and other religious ceremonies in both Poland and Ireland. From a theological point of view, these media are not controversial. By contrast, digital media platforms exhibit a diverse and specialized usage pattern, and therefore are much more theologically contested. Theologically infused discussions about the meaning of digitally mediated rituals often grapple with a contentious issue, revolving around two key aspects. First, during the pandemic there was a debate about the meaning of a community engaged in a digitally connected reality while physically dispersed. This raised complicated questions about the sacredness and authenticity of communal religious experiences mediated through digital platforms that transcend physical boundaries. Second, there were considerations of the temporal and spatial disjuncture between the performance of a ritual and the moment of participation in it. Digital media enable the recording and replay of religious rituals, fostering inquiries into the validity of certain religious acts, such as blessings or participation in sacraments like the spiritual communion, which traditionally rely on specific temporal occurrences. The temporal disconnect sparked debates about the nature of religious acts performed virtually and the believer's engagement with these acts at a time different from their occurrence. The spatial disconnect raised questions about the meaning of the sacred spaces, in particular the connection between legitimized (church altars, pilgrimage sites) and non-legitimized ones, which included home altars with the television or computer screen in the center. These theological controversies have unearthed multifaceted questions about the nature of sacredness in digitally mediated communal experiences and the significance of the temporal dimension in religious acts performed virtually. The digital medium serves as a conduit that connects individuals across vast distances, but in the context of religious ritual, it raises compelling questions about the multiple dimensions of time and space in which recipients engage in these digitally mediated experiences. In sum, the research shows that the blurring of time and space that deep mediatization amplifies (Hepp 2020) had practical and theological consequences for the analyzed religious organizations during the pandemic.

The non-voluntary aspect of the deep mediatization observed in our research is also important because it highlights the fluidity of the entanglement of religion and digital media. The rapid pace of innovation in online religion, which has been lauded by many, was driven by the pressure to adapt to government regulations as well as community pressure (cf. Hepp 2020). The cases we analyzed demonstrate that solving technical problems and launching a religious service does not automatically deepen the mediatization process. The example of online funerals is a case in point. In Poland, the practice was not popular before and during the pandemic, in spite of the available technology; in Ireland, on the contrary, the pandemic period legitimized the ritual. In this case, the cultural context was

crucial. Another illustration, innovations in the online First Communion, carried out on the initiative of local communities, were few from the beginning and unenthusiastically received by bishops who could not find good theological justification for them. This could explain why, once the restrictions were lifted, most parishes and local churches stopped livestreaming or offering other online services, and switched back to in-person worship and gatherings. Even the hope to attract new followers, especially young people and religious seekers (often unfulfilled long-term), could not offset these negative effects.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the religious actors were coerced or compelled to adjust to the intensification of deep mediatization, but there were no clear guidelines regarding what was sufficient in terms of digitalization, or how it should be achieved. There was a general shift toward online streaming, events, and gatherings, and while some churches and organizations issued instructions, they pertained mostly to the practical aspects of what, how, and when to implement. It remains unclear, however, who actually dictates the pace of innovation—except for the tech giants in general—and to what extent should religious organizations abide by it. While some studies stress that these organizations adjust media production and content to meet their own needs (Hall et al. 2023), we should also point out that the pace of innovation may never be explicitly defined, and yet, as an imagined benchmark, it is referred to by religious actors. This “imagined pace of innovation” created, as was shown, very palpable pressures within the religious organizations, and had several very “real” consequences for these structures and their clerical and lay members alike.

In examining religious organizations, it is essential to recognize the diversity in attitudes and the extent of digital media use shaped by hierarchical levels and specific purposes—whether individual or institutional (Radde-Antweiler and Grüenthal 2020). The emergence of digital media innovations during the COVID-19 pandemic came primarily from local initiatives, often initiated by priests and pastors, sometimes in response to local community needs. In the case of hierarchical churches, there was a discernible trend toward a cautious approach to these innovations. While not outright prohibited, they were not actively supported or encouraged in these contexts. Significantly, the approach taken by the hierarchy was deeply intertwined with the understanding of traditions preserved and maintained within the religious organization. This delicate balance between local initiatives and hierarchical caution underscored the varying attitudes and degrees of acceptance of digital media innovations within religious institutions. However, the theological and organizational context was the main determinant of the implementation of digital innovations in churches, regardless of the international variation. We found no major differences between the Polish and Irish Catholic Churches in this respect. And the observed specificity in the Protestant and Orthodox Churches can be explained by internal factors. The direct influence of culture was clear only in the case of funerals and forms of mourning, i.e., rituals for which the manner of celebration is not strictly regulated by the theology and practices adopted in a given church, unlike communion, for example. This leads us to the conclusion that when analyzing the mediatization process, the institutional context must be taken into serious consideration.

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Notes

- ¹ Broadcasts were widely watched in Ireland. As RTE reported “Companies streaming parish services say there’s been a tenfold increase in traffic over the last month or so, with over half a million people tuning in for Sunday masses, broadcast from churches in every corner of the country” (McGrath 2020). Cf. also the report by G. Ganiel (2020).
- ² One of the more popular platforms for Live-streaming a funeral. Others: www.memorillane.ie, <https://funeralslive.ie>, <https://absentfriends.ie> (accessed on 28 October 2023). Such services are also often offered by funeral homes.

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