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Re-envisioning Dulles' Ecclesiological Models for the Digital Age: Towards an Interactive Community of Disciples

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ABSTRACT

The Church faces new challenges and opportunities in fostering communion and evangelization in the digital age. Avery Dulles' Models of the Church provides a foundational framework for understanding ecclesiology, yet its applicability to digital contexts remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by critically analyzing Dulles' ecclesiological models—Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, and Servant—through digital engagement. The objective is to re-envision these models to develop a model called "Interactive Community of Disciples," a dynamic ecclesiological paradigm suited for digital platforms. This study critically analyzes Dulles' models, drawing from theological and ecclesiological references available in library and internet sources. The analysis considers contemporary discussions on digital theology, online ecclesial communities, and CyberSource frameworks. The study also interrogates how digital spaces reshape the Church's mission, authority, and communal identity, examining their limitations and transformative potential. Expected results indicate that while Dulles' models remain relevant, they require adaptation to fully capture digital ecclesiology's interactive, participatory, and decentralized nature. The research

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anticipates that a re-envisioned model will emphasize relationality, shared leadership, and online sacramentality, fostering a Church that is not only present in digital spaces but also actively engaged in meaningful faith-based interactions. This study seeks to contribute to contemporary ecclesiological discourse by proposing a theologically grounded yet contextually responsive model of the Church in the digital era.

Keywords: *digital ecclesiology, discipleship, virtual Church, theology, community*

1. Introduction

There has been a massive increase in internet use worldwide in the past few years. Every day, millions of people are online. According to the Digital 2025 reports published by Hootsuite and We Are Social, Kemp (2025) forecasted that the upcoming year will witness noteworthy advancements in digital trends, highlighting rapid progress in artificial intelligence, evolving social media platforms, and changing consumer behaviors online, all of which are anticipated to reshape modern interconnected living. Manuel Castells' book, *The Rise of the Network Society: Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, first published in 1996 and subsequently revised in 2000 and 2011, examines how "networks" in the information age go beyond the borders of nation-states and constitute themselves as a global system (Castells 2011).

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has profoundly transformed societal interactions and communal dynamics, challenging traditional ecclesiological models (Alshaikh et al. 2024). While foundational, Avery Dulles' (2002) seminal typology of ecclesial models requires re-examination in light of contemporary digital contexts, as existing frameworks often struggle to integrate digital dynamics effectively. With online platforms and virtual communities becoming integral to religious practice and faith formation (Campbell 2020), there is an urgent need to understand how these digital environments shape and redefine the concept of the Church as an "Interactive Community of Disciples."

The concept of digital ecclesiology appeared in several online reports by the New Media Project, where researchers explored how different religious groups' digital practices reflected their underlying beliefs about the church. They examined the assumptions shaping these practices and the deeper meanings behind various approaches to online engagement (Campbell 2020). For example, Jim Rice (2012) discussed what a 'digital ecclesiology' might look like in terms of how it helps us understand a model of how the Church functions in a digital age. He said,

> Just as there are communion ecclesiology and feminist ecclesiologies—theological studies of the Church from particular perspectives—a 'digital ecclesiology' could yield fresh and profound insights into the nature of the Church in the postmodern world and, conversely, into the ways that church bodies make use of new media technologies. (Rice 2012)

Moreover, with this fast change in network society and space, the Church has the duty of creating new ways of interpreting and communicating the Gospel to make it relevant and meaningful for the daily experiences of the human person. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis urged the faithful to "be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us together to read the signs of the times" (2013, no.14). On June 13, 2013, the Pope addressed the members of the 13th Ordinary Council of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops and emphasized the significance of the Assembly's theme: "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" (Francis 2013).

Since Dulles formulated the Models of the Church before the digital era, he may not have developed a model that adequately reflects the challenges of the digital age. While he did not explicitly define digital ecclesiology, the concept can be drawn upon to spark discussions about how digital engagement might necessitate rethinking the Church and revisiting traditional models (Campbell 2020). Drawing on the classic work of Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* (1974), Rice argued that despite digital innovations in how online congregations, clergy networks, and Christian universities gather and communicate, their core liturgical functions aligned with Dulles' theological models, urging a return to historical ecclesiological principles before asserting the emergence of a distinct digital ecclesiology. He concluded:

> The way the Church behaves digitally today is no different, morally or spiritually, than any other mode in which the Church manifests. If the Church is a servant to the marginalized and an advocate for justice, the Church will use its digital presence to fulfill those missions. If the Church

> emphasizes forming the Christian community, social media will increasingly contribute to nurturing communal connections. Proclamation of the Word will always be central to the Church's calling, and new media will join older media as vehicles for the announcing of the good news. (Rice 2012)

However, I would like to argue that Rice has missed significant points. Traditional models emphasize physical interactions and conventional forms of community-building, which may not adequately capture the complexities and opportunities of digital spaces. The "Interactive Community of Disciples" in the digital space seeks to bridge this gap by utilizing digital tools to create meaningful and inclusive faith experiences, particularly engaging younger generations more familiar with digital interactions.

This study aims to adapt Dulles' models for digital contexts, providing practical frameworks for religious leaders, theologians, and digital community builders. Examining the intersection of theology and digital technology, it offers insights into fostering authentic interactions, spiritual growth, and communal solidarity within online faith communities. The findings will be especially valuable for scholars, practitioners, and Church leaders seeking to strengthen the Church's presence in digital spaces and for religious educators and policymakers invested in the relationship between technology, theology, and community engagement.

2. The Digital Ecclesial Reality

The scholarly exploration of online churches is extensive, yet several key works have shaped the discourse. Early research by Schroeder, Heather, and Lee (1997) examined social interaction in virtual worship spaces, highlighting how early online church services replicated traditional liturgical elements within a digital environment. The Barna Group (1998), as cited by Campbell (2003), predicted that by 2010, approximately 20 percent of the population would primarily rely on the internet for religious engagement. A foundational contribution to the field is *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by Hadden and Cowan (2001), which includes Christopher Helland's influential distinction between institutional online religion and grassroots digital faith communities.

Building on this, Young (2008) and Helland (2005) further nuanced the understanding of virtual ecclesial spaces. A significant milestone came in

2004 with the launch of the Methodist-funded *Church of Fools*, a 3D virtual congregation that saw an average of 8,000 daily visitors (Young 2008). Tim Hutchings (2000) observed the growing academic attention to digital religion, with contributions appearing in journals such as *Online* and the *Heidelberg Journal of Religions and the Internet*. Douglas Estes (2009), in *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, defended the legitimacy of virtual churches, urging theological reflection on their role in contemporary faith practice. More recently, Heidi A. Campbell (2012) has provided essential insights into how digital cultures shape religious expression, further solidifying the study of online churches as a critical area of theological inquiry.

Campbell's scholarship on religion and digital media is extensive and multifaceted, providing critical insights into how religious communities engage with digital technologies. In *Digital Judaism*, she examined how Jewish communities use media to preserve cultural heritage and negotiate religious authority online (Campbell 2015). Her co-authored work *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* explored how video games embed religious symbols to shape narratives, examining titles such as *Okami* and *The Legend of Zelda* (Campbell and Grieve 2014). In *Digital Religion*, she systematically studies various media forms, from blogs to virtual worlds, analyzing their impact on faith communities (Campbell 2012). *When Religion Meets New Media* introduced the concept of the "religious-social shaping of technology" (RSST), demonstrating how religious groups actively negotiate technology based on tradition and community values (Campbell 2010). Her foundational book, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, investigated how Christian communities integrate digital practices, emphasizing that online religious networks are deeply embedded in offline life (Campbell 2005). She traced the evolution of religious communication studies, from early notions of "cyber-religion" to the emerging field of "digital religion studies," highlighting both the utopian and dystopian views of technology's impact on faith (Campbell 2005; Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1997). Across these works, Campbell's scholarship underscored contemporary religious practice's dynamic, innovative, and technologically mediated nature.

Stephen O'Leary (1996) initially viewed computer-mediated communication as a transformative force for religion but later adopted a more skeptical stance, acknowledging the rise of online extremism. Similar concerns were raised by scholars such as Jakobsh (2012) regarding Sikh

rituals and McWilliams (2000) on the impact of online Buddhist practices. However, Campbell (2012) challenged this pessimism by framing online religious activities as "virtual religion," exploring MUDs, MOOs, and video games as religious spaces. Hutchings (2007) documented the rise of digital Christian communities, while Karaflogka (2002) distinguished between "religion in cyberspace" and "religion on cyberspace," emphasizing different modes of religious expression online. Højsgaard (2005) advanced the concept of "cyber-religion," questioning whether the internet generates new forms of faith and categorizing online religion based on mediation, content, and organization.

Recognizing this shift, Pope Benedict XVI (2011) highlighted the Church's need to engage deeply with digital culture, reinforcing *Gaudium et Spes* and John Paul II's teachings. Antonio Spadaro 2014) responded with *Cybertheology*, analyzing faith in the digital era and defining cybertheology as the theological study of technoscience. He identified three forms of cybertheology: "theology in" (online sources), "theology of" (cyberspace studies), and "theology for" (theological engagement on the Web). Viewing cybertheology as "the intelligence of faith" in the digital age, Spadaro (2014) argued that it goes beyond sociological reflection, shaping how faith interacts with the logic of the web. Le Duc (2020) argued that cyberspace is no longer a separate reality but an integral part of human life, shaping social interactions, communication, and religious experiences. He emphasized that the internet has moved beyond being a novelty to becoming an essential space where people live, learn, and practice faith, necessitating theological reflection on the digital milieu.

3. Bridging the Digital Divide: Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Era

The notion of the digital divide, introduced in the 1990s, refers to the disparity in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the internet, leaving over four billion people in developing regions without benefits (Hartnett 2019). This gap is described as "large, complex, and multidimensional," driven by inadequate infrastructure, high costs, low digital literacy, and linguistic barriers (World Economic Forum 2019). It exacerbates inequality, creating a digital class divide within and between countries. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications

(2011) highlights that the digital divide is a form of discrimination, underscoring the need for equitable access to avoid further deepening societal disparities. Public institutions are crucial in bringing this gap by providing affordable, multilingual digital resources.

Despite increasing global internet users, the challenge of ensuring quality and universal access remains, hindering opportunities for education, healthcare, and economic development. Social media, though transformative, has exacerbated this divide by spreading misinformation and creating echo chambers, as pointed out by Maria Ressa (2025), who criticized Big Tech companies for prioritizing profit over societal cohesion. Additionally, the rise of online churches has sparked the need for updated ecclesiology to address virtual faith communities' theological and communal implications. As digital technologies reshape social and religious practices, it is imperative for the Church and society to critically examine how they can serve to enhance, rather than hinder, spiritual and community connections in the digital era.

4. Revisiting Dulles' Models of Church

Avery Dulles, an American Jesuit theologian an also a Cardinal, wrote two significant theological studies on the Church and revelation, employing insights from model theory to address fundamental theological issues. Dulles' theory involves a series of questions addressing the purpose, types, and combination of models, which synthesize existing knowledge or generate new insights. He views models as necessary due to the mysterious nature of the Church and revelation, advocating for their coexistence and cross-pollination despite inherent limitations.

The first edition of *Models of the Church* by Dulles was published in 1974. This version introduced five ecclesiological models: Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, and Servant. Later editions expanded on these models, adding the Community of Disciples as a sixth model. The book explores how different theological perspectives shape the understanding of the Church, emphasizing that no single model fully captures its complexity, but rather, a synthesis of these models provides a more balanced ecclesiology.

In this book, Dulles argued for a dynamic approach that accommodates new contexts, challenges traditional perspectives, and urges reevaluation. For instance, the model of the Church as an institution emphasizes hierarchical structures and organizational authority, drawing criticism for fostering clericalism and neglecting lay participation. In contrast, the communion model focuses on the Church as a community of believers, emphasizing mutual love, justice, and the shared gifts of the Spirit among members. Another perspective, the sacrament model, sees the Church as a visible sign of God's grace, combining external structure and internal spiritual life. Additionally, Dulles introduced the Church as a herald, emphasizing its role in proclaiming the Gospel message and promoting social transformation. Lastly, the servant model views the Church as actively serving humanity and advocating for social justice, echoing Jesus' compassionate ministry. Ultimately, the *Sensus Fidelium*—shaped by Newman's and Polanyi's thoughts (2013) lends credibility and authority to theological models within the Church.

5. Evolving Ecclesiology: From Traditional Models to Cyber Contexts

Terrence Merrigan critically analyzed Dulles' approach to theological models, pointing out that while they offer useful frameworks, they also carry limitations, particularly when applied rigidly to ecclesiology (Merrigan 1993, 145). This study followed in Dulles' footsteps by exploring the model of the Church as an Interactive Community of Disciples emerging in the cyber context. A model, he noted, can either be a symbolic or a conceptual representation or abstraction by which we try to organize a body of knowledge (Dulles 2002, 29).

The need for a new model arises from the increasing significance of digital interactions in people's lives. As millions of individuals engage in online platforms daily (Hootsuite and We Are Social 2019), the Church must find ways to be present and active in these virtual spaces. Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasized the importance of being attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and reading the signs of the times to address the challenges of modern society (2013, sec. 14). Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI (2013) highlighted the potential of social media to foster relationships and build communities while also cautioning against its pitfalls. These insights underscore the Church's need

to adapt and develop new models that resonate with contemporary experiences.

The critical analysis of Terrence Merrigan in *Models in the Theology of Avery Dulles* elucidated several insights on how Dulles' "model theory" is to be understood. He noted how theology had accepted the principle of model theory, already long established in other research fields, that models are a legitimate, indeed inevitable, component of scientific discourse. When critically researched and explained, models allow believers to transcend their limitations and converse with people with different outlooks (Merrigan 1993, 145).

Why and whence models? For Merrigan, "[t]he short answer to the question of why models are necessary at all is the fact that both the Church and Revelation are, ultimately, 'mysteries'—realities about which we cannot speak 'directly' but only 'indirectly'" based on analogies drawn from our experience of the world (1993, 145). In *Models of the Church*, Dulles regarded the use of images (e.g., vine, flock, temple) to describe the Church as the first instance of analogical speech and the initial step in forming models. The second step involved employing these images in a process of "critical reflection," which deepened one's theoretical understanding of reality. When this occurs, Dulles argued that an image evolves into a model (2002, 23).

A model, however, cannot capture the totality of the Church's experience. While models provide insight into certain aspects of the Church, they also inherently obscure others. This limitation underscores the necessity for multiple models, each offering only a partial and inadequate explanation of the Church's reality. In this light, this project aims to contribute to conceptualizing a new model of the Church within the digital context.

Furthering the discourses on the models of the Church, Brazal (2015) authored an essay entitled "Church as Sacrament of Yin-Yang Harmony: Toward a More Incisive Participation of Laity and Women in the Church." The paper aims to contribute toward "an East Asian reimagining of ecclesiology that is pluralistic and inclusive of laywomen and men equally with clergy in church ministries" (Brazal 2015, 786). Brazal beautifully crafted contrasting but complementary qualities of generative forces that maintain balance, illustrating the nuances of the Daoist belief in Yin and Yang. She argued that "yin-yang symbolism can be fruitful for reimagining man-woman, cleric–lay, and other dualities in the church as fluid polarities"

(2015, 793). This article is another example of how Dulles' model framework can be used to rethink our contemporary ecclesiology (Dulles 1985).

Building on Terrence Merrigan's critical analysis of Dulles' approach to theological models and recognizing the inherent limitations of any single model to fully encapsulate the Church's experience, this study proposes a new model of the Church in the digital space as an "Interactive Community of Disciples." As highlighted in the foregoing, multiple models are necessary, each offering only partial insights. This proposed model aims to address the increasing significance of digital interactions in people's lives, as millions engage on online platforms daily. By developing a model that aligns with contemporary experiences, the Church can be present and active in these virtual spaces. This approach follows the discourses on the models of the Church and incorporates the dynamic and interactive nature of digital communities, fostering a holistic and inclusive ecclesiological perspective that resonates with modern society's needs.

6. Assessing the Interactive Community of Disciples through Dulles' Framework

Using Avery Dulles' framework for describing Church models, this study analyzed the objectives, beneficiaries, and communal bonds of the proposed model. By applying Dulles' (2002, 201-2012) seven evaluative criteria—basis in Scripture, basis in Tradition, fostering corporate identity and mission, promoting Christian virtues and values, aligning with contemporary religious experiences, theological fruitfulness, and effectiveness in external relations—we assess the model of Interactive Community of Disciples.

These criteria highlight the proposed model's strengths and limitations. Evaluating the model through these lenses provides a broader, integrative ecclesiological perspective, acknowledging each model's limitations while benefiting from their strengths. To assess the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Interactive Community of Disciples, Dulles' criteria offer a comprehensive framework for understanding virtual faith communities.

First, the Interactive Community of Disciples must be grounded in Scripture, aligning practices and teachings with biblical principles. Second, it should uphold Christian Tradition, maintaining continuity with the

Church's historical and theological foundations. Third, it should cultivate communal identity and shared mission, fostering collective commitment to faith and service. Fourth, the model should promote core Christian virtues and values, guiding spiritual and ethical growth. Fifth, it must resonate with contemporary religious experiences, addressing spiritual needs meaningfully. Sixth, it should demonstrate theological depth, contributing to the ongoing reflection and development of Christian thought. Lastly, the model must engage meaningfully with those beyond its digital boundaries, fostering dialogue, outreach, and inclusivity. These criteria ensure the Interactive Community of Disciples can sustain an authentic Christian community in the digital age.

6.1. Basis in Scripture

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew records, "[F]or where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). This verse is part of a larger discussion on biblical exegesis and is not a parameter for defining the Church, nor can it be used to argue for or against online churches. However, it establishes an important principle: "God works when individuals work together." Critics may argue that the Bible does not mention the Interactive Community of Disciples or online churches. It is important to note that the Bible does not contain terms like cyberchurch, cathedrals, Baptist churches, and Reformed churches. This is because the Bible is not a collection of proof texts and does not provide a direct definition of the Church.

In his seminal work, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Paul Minear (1960) identifies 96 metaphors that describe the Church. Minear notes that "none of those metaphors are descriptions, and none consider the dynamics and reality of the church. They are images that depict the Church in all God's immensity." Today, various models of the Church exist, including the Interactive Community of Disciples, which is a significant metaphor exemplifying how followers are to relate to God and one another. If the Interactive Community of Disciples facilitates believers' encounters with God, it aligns with the biblical imagery of the Church.

Avery Dulles asserted that the Church is a community—a worshiping community of believers who serve as both a sign and instrument of the union between God and humanity. The Gospel, according to Matthew, records Jesus saying, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). The context in which Jesus spoke this was

not within church buildings but rather in more intimate, smaller gatherings. The early Church often met in private homes, as seen in Acts of the Apostles and in letters like Romans 16:5, where the "house church" concept is evident. Paul referd to the Church in 1 Corinthians 16:19 as meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. The early Christian communities were characterized by face-to-face associations, fluid organization, and intimate relationships based on covenants rather than contracts.

The Church, described as the "People of God" in 1 Peter 2:9, extends beyond individual homes and even beyond cities, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, and 1 Thessalonians 1:1. The New Testament affirms that the Church is not confined to buildings, but instead refers to the gathering of believers, whether in private homes or across cities. Wayne Grudem (1994) explains that "church" in the New Testament can refer to any group of believers, from small house meetings to the global community of all true believers.

The term *ekklesia,* used in the New Testament, referred to an assembly or gathering of people, never to a building. Given this, the concept of an online gathering is feasible. When people gather in Christ's name, He is present among them, whether in person or virtually. This idea aligns with the understanding that God's Spirit transcends time and space, as highlighted in Colossians 1:18, where Christ is described as the head of the Church, supreme in all things. Therefore, online gatherings in Christ's name maintain the biblical integrity of the Church community.

The Greek term *ekklesia* is significant because it emphasizes gathering people rather than a physical structure. The Church, as depicted in Scripture, refers to a community of believers united under the Lordship of Christ, sharing a common citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20). The New Testament's usage of "church" underscores the people that form the congregation, regardless of the location or method of their gathering.

Avery Dulles (2002) further elaborated on this concept by describing the Church as a "Community," focusing on the personal and interpersonal fellowship with God and one another. This model, while universal, is expressed in local gatherings of believers, each embodying the same potential as the whole body of Christ.

The New Testament stresses the importance of believers "coming together" (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:26) and warns against neglecting these gatherings (Hebrews 10:25). These gatherings were essential for teaching, prayer, breaking bread, and fellowship (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). The core of

the Church's identity lies in the people who make up their bodies, and thus, there should be no restriction on the location or method of their gathering. The emphasis is on believers' collective worship and communion, whether in physical or digital spaces, as the Church remains defined by the unity and Lordship of Christ, not the physical setting in which it gathers.

6.2. Basis in the post-Apostolic Tradition

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model can be linked to the concept of the Church as the (body) of Christ. Both foreground the invisible feature of the Church (unity in Christ) in relation to its visible structure. Augustine and other Church Fathers elucidated the Body of Christ, stressing the invisible communion that unites Christians. Augustine speaks of both the earthly and the heavenly Church, including the angels and souls of the departed. Thus, as cited by Amin (2020), both Thomas Aquinas and other theological perspectives affirm that the Body of Christ is not visible.

Invisible communion, though by its nature always growing, presupposes the life of grace, by which we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), and the practice of the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Only in this way do we have true communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nor is faith sufficient; we must persevere in sanctifying grace and love, remaining within the Church "bodily" as well as "in our heart"; what is required, in the words of Saint Paul, is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Keeping these invisible bonds intact is a specific moral duty incumbent upon Christians who wish to participate fully in the Eucharist by receiving the body and blood of Christ (Amiri 2020).

The Church is a "divinizing communion with God, whether incompletely in this life or completely in the life of glory" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q.75, art.1). It is the Holy Spirit that binds the members of the Church. Visible structures like sacraments, laws, and so on have a secondary role in fostering a disposition toward an interior union with God through God's grace.

However, the thrust toward institutionalism during the period of Emperor Constantine led to the over-emphasis on the visible features of the Church in the succeeding centuries (Williston 2014). In the early 20th century, Belgian Jesuit Emile Mersch revitalized the Mystical Body of Christ concept and distinguished between the institutional Church and the mystical body as those who embody the life of Christ (Amiri 2020).

In 1943, Pius XII published his encyclical *Mystics Corporis*, in which he identified the mystical body of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church. Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* affirmed the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ but departs from *Mystics Corporis* in distinguishing between the Church as a hierarchical society and the Body of Christ. The institutional Church is comparable to Christ's human nature, while the Body of Christ is to its divine nature. It also did not identify the Body of Christ simply to the Roman Catholic Church (Pius XII 1943; Vatican II 1964).

Within the framework of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" associated with local dioceses and parishes, there exists a seamless continuum between the Church's online and offline expressions. This interconnectedness serves as a manifestation of the Church's visible and invisible dimensions, where its sacramental and spiritual realities are harmoniously integrated (Yohannes 2017; Campbell and Evolvi 2020). These communities reflect the ecclesial principle of *communio*—a visible gathering that transcends physical presence through digital engagement.

In contrast, independent "Interactive Communities of Disciples" tend to emphasize the Church's invisible dimension, particularly its spiritual unity in Christ as the foundation of ecclesial identity. This focus highlights the mystical nature of the Church as the body of Christ, wherein digital interactions serve to strengthen the spiritual communion of believers regardless of their geographic or institutional affiliation. Such ecclesial models invite a deeper reflection on the ways digital connectivity participates in the Church's mission of unity and inclusivity.

6.3. Sense of Corporate Identity and Mission

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model is strong in fostering a corporate identity and mission, especially among the young, those who are digitally connected, and those who may not be "wired" but benefit from this connectedness.

To ask whether the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model can give church members a sense of their corporate identity and mission is the same as asking if the "Interactive Community of Disciples" is genuinely a church. Campbell (2020) explained that "religious community is possible online but is different from traditional ideas of community."

The sense of mission, nonetheless, need not be weaker. While the model of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" may not emphasize

mission in the sense of gaining converts to Christianity, the community itself actively engages in mission through dialogue with others, including the poor, the excluded, and people of different faiths and religions. In the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), Pope Francis described the sad reality that "persons are no longer considered as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, particularly whether they are impoverished and disabled, 'not yet valuable'—such as the unborn—or 'no longer needed'—such as the old" (*Fratelli Tutti,* no. 18). We have become oblivious to all forms of wastefulness, beginning with food waste, which is abhorrent in the extreme. This illusion, which is blind to the great fraternal virtues, leads to "a kind of cynicism." For that is the temptation that awaits us if we follow the path of disillusionment and disappointment. Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about regeneration. The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model reminds us of the good Samaritan who goes out of his way to be a "neighbor" to the person who has been victimized. The mission of this model of Church is to witness especially to the victims of society the compassion of Jesus.

6.4. The Capacity to Foster Christian Virtues and Values

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model fosters the value of option for the marginalized and excluded and the need for participation and equality. The Parable of the Good Samaritan stresses the inclusion of and participation of other/s in the promotion of God's reign. In this story, it is not the religious people—the priest and the Levite—who fully understand what it means to be a neighbor, but the Samaritan, an "other" to the Jews. Jesus expanded here the meaning of neighbor to include not only members of dominant groups, people who are like us, but also those from the peripheries who are not like us.

A positive aspect of computer-mediated communication is the potential for intensifying collaboration in the neighborhood. The collaborative process blurs the boundaries (between men and women, between students and teachers) because their roles have become somewhat shared and interchangeable. Women are placed in a collaborative environment with men to explore, examine, explain, and reorganize their knowledge. The development of the internet and digital media, together with the increase in the population's educational level, the changes brought about by the development of advanced service industries, and the growing demand for non-

material labor has dramatically changed how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed (Fortunati 2007; Lin et al. 2000).

The traditional boundaries between those who create information and those who consume it and the tools, time, and space for disseminating knowledge have also been blurred (Shirky 2008, 15). Bridging the gaps between the elite and the ordinary people is another important value promoted in the "Interactive Community of Disciples." Hargitay (2008, 936–944) asserted that universal access to digital technology serves as a crucial means of bridging the divide between societal elites and the broader population. This endeavor fosters intergenerational and interfaith engagement while addressing disparities across social strata, encompassing both the affluent and the marginalized. Such principles resonate deeply with the theological vision of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model, which aspires to embody Christ's call to unity, inclusivity, and justice within the digital neighborhood.

In traditional churches, women's roles were usually used more to handle functions in the domestic sphere. In terms of communication, women were bound to minimal knowledge production since their role was domestic and connected to a limited and closed network (Tannen 1990). The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model, involving both women and men, has enabled women to expand their communication processes and engage with previously unknown individuals (Tannen 1990). Generally, cyberspace serves as an open platform where women can discuss a variety of issues. The unknown women become known in the Interactive Community of Disciples, and possible controls reappeared.

Through multilateral communication, the internet may challenge and assert conventional authority. The web offers the plausibility of subverting authority structures. It can potentially break down the traditional unidirectional flow of information from church authority to the faithful. However, Christians tend to duplicate the same offline chain of command online. They are used to having a clear mission statement and set of principles that have been decided by committees and worked out through specific authority structures (Campbell 2013). If you do that vetting process, you will lose many people because the digital natives are not used to that in an instantaneous, global culture. Campbell noted that people no longer live in these tightly bound groups defined by family, institution, or geography. They live in these fluid networks, and it is up to the institution to see how we will frame that as a challenge or an opportunity.

6.5. Correspondence with the Religious Experience of Humanity Today

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model corresponds to the experience of two important groups: the digital natives and the immigrants. This model emerges as a response to the digital native experience, where individuals, especially younger generations, seamlessly interact with technology from an early age. Observing children independently navigating smartphones and tablets highlights their innate adaptability to digital tools, which continue to evolve rapidly. As previous generations adapted to innovations like Betamax, today's youth are immersed in ever-advancing digital experiences. However, if the Church lags technologically, it risks becoming irrelevant to digital natives who expect personalized and interactive engagement, like their curated social media and online experiences.

While some perceive this generation as disconnected from faith, they are not disengaged from spirituality but rather from churches that fail to integrate into their digital realities. Millennials and digital natives seek immersive and engaging online interactions that mirror their offline lives, fluidly blending both realms. They form communities that extend across digital and physical spaces, requiring churches to rethink traditional structures and adapt to online platforms. Unlike digital immigrants, digital natives process information rapidly, favor multitasking, and engage in nonlinear, hypertext thinking, necessitating a shift in the Church's approach to engagement and communication. As digital natives become the dominant global population, churches must evolve to meet their expectations and integrate faith into their digital ecosystems (Prensky 2001).

Digital natives prioritize social platforms over traditional media and value authenticity over professional branding. In an "Interactive Community of Disciples," faith integrates with daily life through smart devices, from inspirational messages on mirrors and refrigerators to Bible study in autonomous vehicles. Technology enables constant connectivity, allowing believers to engage in spiritual practices and community interactions across digital and physical spaces.

This is just a foretaste into the future of the "Interactive Community of Disciples," and the Church can play a role by embracing life-changing gospel messages and using innovative methods to make them available. As a missionary, take the Church off the wall and bring it to the people (Caston 2015).

Moreover, there are those known as digital immigrants—individuals who were not born into the digital era but have embraced technology as part of their lives. Like all immigrants, some adapt more easily than others. However, they often retain certain habits that reflect their transition into the digital world. This "digital immigrant accent" can be seen in behaviors such as preferring printed materials over digital ones, writing down website addresses instead of bookmarking them, or struggling with new technological interfaces (Prensky 2001).

Digital immigrants, while gradually adapting to digital communication, continue to engage socially in ways distinct from their digitally native children. They often remain skeptical about the effectiveness of learning through platforms such as YouTube or social media as they struggle to engage with these tools for educational purposes. Campbell (2020), through over 120 interviews with online missionaries, theologians, and technology specialists in the USA and Europe, identifies an emerging religious phenomenon she terms "religious digital creativity." This concept describes how individuals utilize digital media to innovate within ministry while exploring its relationship with institutional churches. Campbell raised critical questions regarding whether churches acknowledge this evolving religious experience, perceive it as a challenge or competition, or seek to integrate it into their broader mission and objectives.

6.6. Theological Fruitfulness

The "Interactive Community of Disciples" model serves as a rich space for theological exploration, providing a platform for faith communities and scholars to engage in meaningful theological reflection. This digital space allows theologians to reconsider fundamental aspects of theological anthropology, mainly what it means to be human in a cyber-mediated world (Brazal 2014, 199-220). Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg—a hybrid of human and machine—raises profound theological questions about embodiment in cyberspace.

If digital technology becomes an integral part of human identity, then theological discourse must grapple with the implications of Christ's embodiment in virtual spaces. Can we conceptualize a "Cyborg Christ" as part of cyber-theology (Vicini and Brazal 2015, 148-65)? Furthermore, liturgical and sacramental theology must address whether Christ's real presence extends to the online masses (Labenek 2014). In missiology, the cyber-

context redefines mission, prompting reflection on what it means to be a cyber-missionary in an increasingly digitized world.

Beyond theology, the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model fosters inclusivity and interfaith dialogue, promoting engagement beyond traditional church boundaries. Inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan, this model recognizes grace even among those marginalized or outside the Christian faith. Platforms like Belief.netfacilitate interreligious dialogue and challenge internal church inequalities, including clericalism and sexism. The fruitfulness of the "Interactive Community of Disciples" model lies in its ability to build bridges between diverse religious traditions, creating meaningful connections between Christians of various denominations, non-Christians, and secular humanists through digital engagement.

6.7. Capacity to Foster Good Relationship with Those Outside Their Group

The conceptualization of the Church as an "Interactive Community of Disciples" underscores its intrinsic ability to nurture constructive relationships not only among its members but also with those beyond its ecclesial confines. This openness is rooted in a theological recognition of grace operative outside the Church's visible boundaries, as exemplified in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Within this model, the Samaritans—symbolizing those marginalized or traditionally excluded from religious or societal acceptance—are seen as vessels of divine grace.

In this digital age, cyberspace emerges as a critical avenue through which religious communities can embody this openness. Platforms such as Belief.net provide a space for dialogue and engagement that transcend denominational and doctrinal divides. These digital interactions serve as a corrective to systemic imbalances within the Church, such as clericalism and gender inequality, while simultaneously fostering relational depth with individuals of other Christian traditions, adherents of non-Christian religions, and even secular humanists. Thus, the Church's digital engagement not only mirrors its theological commitment to inclusivity but also manifests its capacity for meaningful, grace-filled interactions in an interconnected world.

7. Conclusion: Towards an Interactive Community of Disciples

This study has critically engaged with Avery Dulles' ecclesiological models in light of the digital age, proposing a necessary re-envision of these frameworks to address the transformative realities of online faith communities. Traditional ecclesiology, while rooted in historical and doctrinal continuity, must evolve to remain relevant in a world where digital interactions shape social, relational, and even spiritual experiences. The proposed model of "Interactive Community of Disciples" serves as a theological response to the shifting contours of ecclesial life in cyberspace, emphasizing relationality, shared mission, and adaptive ecclesial structures that transcend physical limitations while maintaining the Church's identity and mission. This model aligns with the Church's incarnational and sacramental nature, affirming that God's presence is not confined to sacred buildings but is dynamically mediated through digital encounters.

Dulles' Institutional Model, traditionally centered on hierarchical leadership and doctrinal authority, must adapt to the digital landscape's decentralized and participatory nature. The Church's engagement with digital platforms requires a more synodal approach, fostering shared leadership and co-responsibility, ensuring that authority structures are flexible and responsive to the needs of online communities. Meanwhile, the Mystical Communion Model, which highlights relational unity in Christ, finds new theological depth in the interconnectedness of virtual faith communities. These communities, despite existing beyond physical spaces, can facilitate genuine ecclesial communion, demonstrating that the Spirit's work is not bound by geography but is present wherever believers gather in faith.

The Sacrament Model, while raising theological challenges regarding presence and participation, invites a renewed understanding of sacramentality in the digital age. While the materiality of the sacraments remains essential, digital interactions offer new possibilities for spiritual encounters, reinforcing the belief that grace is not confined to physical proximity. Theologically, this affirms that sacramental life, while rooted in tangible signs, can be complemented by online liturgical participation, pastoral engagement, and faith formation. Similarly, the Herald Model is revitalized by digital media, which expands the Church's prophetic mission beyond traditional spaces. The internet serves as a contemporary Areopagus, where the proclamation of the Gospel can engage diverse audiences in dynamic,

interactive ways, making evangelization more accessible and responsive to contemporary spiritual needs.

The Servant Model is perhaps the most naturally aligned with digital ecclesiology, as online platforms provide new avenues for social justice, advocacy, and pastoral outreach. The digital Church, reflecting the kenotic (self-emptying) mission of Christ, must engage with marginalized voices, promote justice, and cultivate spaces of healing and support in cyberspace. Whether through online solidarity movements, virtual pastoral care, or digital humanitarian initiatives, the Church's mission to serve the world is significantly amplified in the digital age.

The application of Dulles' ecclesiological criteria provides a systematic framework for assessing the legitimacy and efficacy of online churches. These criteria encompass fidelity to Scripture, continuity with Christian Tradition, a coherent communal identity and mission, the cultivation of virtues and values, attentiveness to contemporary religious contexts, theological profundity, and a commitment to inclusivity. The New Testament underscores the indispensability of the assembly of believers, whether in tangible or virtual realms, affirming the ecclesial unity that is grounded in Christ.

Conceptualized as the body of Christ, the "Interactive Community of Disciples" embodies the spiritual unity of believers, in accordance with the ethos of early Christian ecclesiology. Digital faith communities exemplify this by fostering a shared ecclesial identity and mission through dialogue and outreach initiatives that reflect Christ's compassion. Moreover, online churches advocate for inclusivity and equality, confronting hierarchical tendencies and providing platforms for marginalized voices within the ecclesial body.

These digital ecclesial expressions cater to diverse audiences—both digital natives and immigrants—through personalized and interactive modalities of engagement. By doing so, they challenge conventional ecclesiastical paradigms to adapt to the evolving digital milieu. Digital platforms, furthermore, serve as loci for innovative theological reflection, addressing novel constructs such as human-cyborg identity and the manifestation of Christ's presence in the digital sphere.

The notion of "Interactive Communities of Disciples" also prioritizes interfaith dialogue and an openness to the other, thereby addressing structural inequities such as clericalism and sexism. When aligned with Dulles' criteria, these "Interactive Communities of Disciples" uphold doctrinal

integrity, foster inclusivity, and maintain theological relevance, presenting themselves as authentic ecclesial realities that effectively minister to the spiritual needs of today's interconnected society.

While Dulles' models remain valuable, they require theological adaptation to fully engage with the interactive, participatory, and relational nature of digital ecclesiology. The proposed "Interactive Communities of Disciples" model does not seek to replace existing models but to expand them in ways that honor both tradition and innovation. This model affirms that online churches, when properly grounded in theological reflection, can maintain doctrinal integrity, inclusivity, and spiritual vitality, ensuring that the Church remains a relevant and transformative presence in the digital world. By re-envisioning Dulles' ecclesiology, this study asserts that the Church must not only exist in digital spaces but must actively shape them as spaces of authentic discipleship, theological reflection, and communal engagement. This vision ensures that the Church continues to be a living, dynamic, and mission-driven body, effectively responding to the spiritual needs of a digitally connected society.

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