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Photo by Thien Nguyen, SVD

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Mapping Contemporary Currents in Religion and Communication

The contributions in this issue of *Religion and Social Communication* explore the evolving intersections of religion, culture, spirituality, and the digital world. The authors pay particular attention to the ethical and practical challenges that arise from contemporary communication technologies. Taken together, the articles examine the relationship between digital communication, cultural identity, institutional trust, and philosophical interpretation. Although the studies come from different contexts and methods, they share a concern for identifying vulnerabilities and offering ethical or methodological responses to rapid technological and social change.

To help readers appreciate the wider significance of this issue, the contributions can be grouped into four clusters: (1) digital communication, competency gaps, and ethical frameworks; (2) cultural identity, faith, and the challenge to authenticity; (3) governance, trust, and accountability; and (4) philosophical and hermeneutical foundations.

1. Digital Communication, Competency Gaps, and Ethical Frameworks

Several contributions look at how religious institutions, especially within the Catholic context, try to communicate ethically and effectively in digital settings. Bartolome identifies notable competency gaps among parish social-communication volunteers. He points out that many volunteers feel confident in ethical practice but less so in theology or digital analytics. His proposed "SOCCOM Academy" responds to this need by combining formation in theology, analytics, and crisis readiness.

Navas develops a framework for managing the Church's digital reputation during sexual abuse crises. Her approach stresses empathy, accountability, transparency, and steady digital monitoring. In a related way, Redubla examines how Pope Francis includes principles of Media and Information Literacy in his encyclicals through strategies of discernment, dialogue, advocacy, and media sustainability.

Taguitag examines the narcissism and addictive behavior seen in digital culture by drawing on Ferdinand Ulrich's concept of Being. He suggests a more charitable and purpose-centered approach to online life. Paul shows how new technologies such as AI, drones, and virtual queue systems are reshaping pilgrimage experiences in Kerala. These developments suggest growing institutional capacity to use technology within sacred settings. Desfianti, Annabel, and Angelina also study digital communication and highlight its mixed effects in Indonesia's religious governance. They note that digital media can both promote inclusion and increase polarization.

In various ways, these studies point to the need for ethical formation, technological literacy, and stronger institutional preparation in a society where digital communication is becoming central to religious practice.

2. Cultural Identity, Faith, and the Challenge to Authenticity

The second theme pertains to how cultural identity shapes religious authenticity in today's social and media environments. Jin and Xu show that Malaysian Buddhist youth continue to view temple life and direct interactions with monastic leaders as the most authentic forms of religious practice. Digital platforms may be convenient, but they do not replace embodied experience.

Cadingpal, Lazaga, and Sampayan study the Ilokano expression *Makaammo'n ti Apo* ("God will take care of it"). They interpret it as a cultural expression of spirituality that contrasts with more individualistic Western ideas. Nguyen explores similar tensions in Vietnam. He argues that collectivist cultural patterns can overshadow personal faith development and present challenges for building a more synodal Church.

Taguitag's reflection on Being also contributes to this conversation. He warns that digital narcissism threatens the integrity of Catholic identity. Paul identifies shared motifs in Hindu and Catholic pilgrimages in Kerala. These motifs include embodied movement, communal travel, and cultural ethos. He notes that physical pilgrimage remains central to spiritual identity even as digital tools assist with logistics.

From their respective contexts, these contributions show how cultural norms and communal identities in Filipino, Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Indian milieux shape the lived expression of faith. They also reveal the tension that emerges when culturally embedded practices meet digital or institutional structures.

3. Governance, Trust, and Accountability

The third theme discussed in the contributions looks at how institutions build, lose, and rebuild trust. Drawing on Public Trust Theory, Desfianti, Annabel, and Angelina argue that fairness, procedural legitimacy, transparency, and inclusive representation are key to public trust in Indonesia's religious governance. Trust weakens when governance appears inconsistent or influenced by majority pressure.

Navas also focuses on accountability in her study of crisis communication within the Catholic Church. She argues that victim-centered communication and transparent truth-seeking are necessary to restore credibility. Bartolome adds to this conversation by identifying gaps in parish communication governance. These include informal crisis responses and a lack of clear policies. He recommends formal communication protocols and crisis drills to strengthen accountability.

Trust, as demonstrated in the cited articles, depends on more than communication skill. It rests on ethical governance, consistent action, and structural integrity.

4. Philosophical and Hermeneutical Foundations

The final theme considers deeper questions of interpretation, knowledge, and metaphysics. Liu critiques Zagzebski's virtue responsibilism and argues that intellectual virtue alone cannot resolve the classic tensions raised by the Gettier problem.

Taguitag presents a metaphysical reading of Ulrich's concept of Being. He describes Being as a divine gift and uses this idea to respond to the distortions of selfhood seen in digital culture. Abraham introduces performance criticism as a useful hermeneutical tool for today's digital environment. He notes that the Bible's roots in oral performance make this method valuable in a time when digital media has created something like a "second orality." Cadingpal, Lazaga, and Sampayan employ hermeneutical phenomenology to interpret Ilokano spirituality as a valid source of theological insight. Redubla uses a socio-cultural discourse approach to show how Pope Francis includes media literacy in his theological communication through careful strategies of reflection and dialogue.

While seemingly diverse in their approaches and contexts of examination, these contributions remind us that philosophical and hermeneutical methods continue to shape how religious communities understand meaning, identity, and existence.

Despite not having a designated theme for this issue of the journal, when all the contributions are considered in their relationship to one another as well as individually, this issue reveals the many ways religion now engages with swiftly changing communicative, cultural, and technological environments. They show the ethical demands of modern communication technology, the cultural factors that influence authentic expressions of faith, the conditions needed for building and restoring institutional trust, and the philosophical questions that ground reflection in religious life. We hope that this collection encourages further research, conversation, and creativity in the study of religion and social communication.

Anthony Le Duc, SVD
Chief Editor

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Managing Digital Reputation During Sexual Abuse Crises: Communication Strategies for the Catholic Church

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ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church's reputation has been significantly compromised by intensifying the media coverage of sexual abuse scandals, resulting in disillusionment among its adherents and diminished conversion rates. This study employs a systematic approach to analyze real-world digital crisis behaviors across various contexts, identifying six critical indicators of impending digital crises and determining whether a series of criticisms in social media would constitute an incident or a crisis and how to manage them accordingly. Drawing from this analysis, a comprehensive framework tailored for the Catholic Church was developed, encompassing prevention, management, and mitigation phases. This structure transcends mere image preservation, aiming to demonstrate the Church's commitment to rectifying past transgressions, fostering a culture of safety and protection, and resolutely addressing challenges. The proposed guidelines offer pragmatic approaches to managing digital crises, including protocols for establishing crisis committees, addressing negative social media discourse, and implementing data-driven decision-making processes. By emphasizing continuous monitoring, targeted spokesperson training, and active stakeholder engagement, these recommendations provide the Church with essential tools for effective crisis management. These orientations underscore the significance of post-crisis accountability and the incorporation of lessons learned to strengthen the Church's evangelistic mission. By prioritizing empathy, accountability, and transparency in communication, this roadmap presents a strategic approach for enhancing the Church's digital crisis response capabilities. This methodology enabled the institution to restore trust within its community and effectively realign its focus

on its fundamental spiritual mission, thereby demonstrating an unwavering commitment to justice and healing.

Keywords: *digital crisis management, Catholic Church, sexual abuse scandal, communication strategy, digital reputation*

"I refused to believe that sexuality is important in life itself. I refused as a way of not acknowledging that I had been violated and abused at a young age. Denial was a manifestation of fear and my inability to overcome such painful moments. One way to cope is to have the strength to acknowledge that I was abused and to say it today."

This statement was made by Ricardo in Quito, Ecuador, in 2024, one day before his suicide.[1]

1. Introduction

Few issues in the past 40 years have commanded as much global media attention, public debate, and emotional response as the sexual abuse crisis within the Catholic Church (Rashid and Barron 2019). While historical evidence suggests the prior presence of these kinds of perpetrations (Doyle et al. 2006), public reckoning began to intensify in the late 1980s, driven by increased media coverage of individual cases, particularly in the United States (Terry 2015). Key events in Louisiana and Massachusetts marked milestones, establishing a narrative of pedophile priests and highlighting inadequate institutional responses, including silence, cover-ups, and lack of clear protocols (Maniscalco 2005). Although these occurrences raised awareness of the phenomenon, they were initially considered isolated incidents—mainly within the United States—due to the media's concentrated coverage in that region (Terry 2015).

However, this perception began to shift as the matter gained international attention, with other countries slowly addressing sexual abuse in their dioceses during the 1990s. In Canada, allegations of abuse led the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to issue a statement in 1992 recommending a victim-centered approach and acknowledging past failures to adequately protect children. Australia took a similar step in 1996, with the Australian Catholic Bishops'

[1] In a final act before his suicide at the National Congress of Ecuador, the individual referred to here as Ricardo (pseudonym) compiled evidence related to the sexual abuse he endured. This evidence, comprising scanned documents, emails, and WhatsApp messages, spanned a period exceeding 36 years. He reportedly sent this collection to his wife via email. Ricardo's death suggests a profound sense of despair and a link to his pursuit of justice, which proved unsuccessful in both legal and ecclesiastical channels. Source: Wambra Medio Comunitario: https://wambra.ec/impunidad-sagrada-silencio-abuso-iglesia/.

Conference and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes publishing the document "Towards Healing." This document outlined principles and procedures for handling abuse complaints and acknowledged the Church's failure to prevent abuse, particularly through the transfer of clergy to new parishes without appropriate action. In Ireland, the prominent 1994 case of decades-long child sexual abuse had a significant societal impact. The televised trial brought the perpetrator's actions directly into public consciousness, allegedly contributing to increased public pressure and political instability (Moore 1995).

Ultimately, *The Boston Globe*'s 2002 investigation of the Catholic sex abuse crisis increased public attention and propelled it onto the global stage (Henley 2010). This monumental body of work, comprising nearly two dozen stories submitted for Pulitzer consideration, part of 600 published by *The Globe* that year on the scandal, earned the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. The series, which later served as the basis for the Oscar-winning film *Spotlight*, distinguished itself by its powerful combination of rigorous reporting and compelling storytelling, humanizing even some of the scandal's less sympathetic figures (Powers 2016). This pivotal moment initiated what some scholars have termed the Decade of Crisis (2002–2012), characterized by a sustained surge in media coverage and public scrutiny (Plante and McChesney 2011).

During this period, Pope Benedict XVI emerged as a central figure in the United States' media coverage of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse crisis. He was often associated with perceived inadequacies in the Vatican's reactive management and prioritization of institutional reputation over victim welfare (Wan 2010). However, his pontificate also initiated significant reforms, including the 2009 authorization of Special Faculties for dismissing clerics in extraordinary circumstances, and the 2011 Circular Letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which called for the development of consistent guidelines for handling abuse cases. These actions demonstrate an evolving institutional response, indicating concrete internal efforts despite the public's perception of deficiencies (Biliniewicz 2020).

This surge in reporting coupled with increased public pressure led to both legal and canonical actions against abusers and the institutions that enabled them (Francis 2014). These actions included trials, convictions, and the removal of priests from their ministries, alongside the imposition of canonical penalties, such as suspension and laicization. This pervasive media coverage transcended traditional news outlets and permeated popular culture through books, films, and documentaries (Verschueren 2013). Social media amplified the scandal, facilitating rapid information dissemination, fostering public outrage, and empowering survivors to share their stories (Cahill and Wilkinson 2017).

This trend of increased reporting, via both traditional media outlets and social media platforms, extended to regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean (Lecaros and Suárez 2024), Asia, and Africa since 2002 (Méténier

2020), although the number of reported cases remains relatively low compared to those in Europe and the United States. This disparity likely stems from systemic barriers and a historical reluctance to address the issue within these contexts, rather than a lower prevalence of abuse itself (Paulson 2002). In contrast, media coverage has widened its global focus. While the initial media focus centered on child abuse perpetrated by priests, it later expanded to the abuse of adults by priests or religious figures, as well as by lay individuals working within Catholic institutions (Child Rights International Network 2025).

By the second decade of the 21st century, the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandals had become firmly entrenched within the media's agenda-setting function (Rashid and Barron 2019). Non-confessional media played a crucial role in shaping public discourse, highlighting the implications of events for power dynamics, abuse, and institutional accountability (Terry 2015). In contrast, Catholic media, such as the Catholic News Agency, Catholic News Service, EWTN News, National Catholic Register, America Magazine, Catholic Herald, and Zenit News Agency, often prioritized a more spiritual approach. Their coverage emphasized a change of paradigm, a culture of disclosure, and international cooperation. Simultaneously, both sectors examined the causes of the crisis and the Church's responses, including the establishment of task forces, commissions, and protocols (Zavadilová 2022).

The scandal has profoundly impacted the Catholic Church, eroding trust among its members and the wider public (John Paul II 2002), impeding conversion processes, and hindering evangelization (Benedict XVI 2010). Prioritizing institutional reputation over victims fostered deep mistrust, impacting the Church's ability to communicate its messages effectively. Pope Francis (2014) called for prioritizing abuse survivor voices—sexual, spiritual, economic, power, and conscience—as crucial for healing, repentance, justice, and reconciliation. In a distrust climate, the Church must acknowledge failures, seek forgiveness, care for victims, implement preventive measures, and rebuild trust through transparency and accountability at all levels.

This damage extends beyond the spiritual realm, particularly in the digital sphere, where the rapid dissemination of information makes it crucial for the Church to adapt its communication strategies to this new reality. Therefore, notwithstanding the Church's emphasis on transparency and justice, the ramifications of the controversy necessitate enhanced digital crisis management tools and specialized training for spokespersons in transparent, assertive, and empathetic communication.

These resources and training must be tailored to the ecclesiastical context and structure for effective digital communication. In contrast to corporate interactions, which often prioritize institutional preservation, the Catholic Church's crisis communication requires a distinct ethical approach grounded in absolute veracity, the rigorous pursuit of truth and transparency, a victim-centered

approach that prioritizes victim welfare and rights, and zero tolerance for abuse, meaning transparent, timely reporting, and unequivocal condemnation of all abuse (Francis 2024).

In this context, this study presents a pragmatic method for enhancing the Church's digital crisis response and provides guidelines for prevention, management, and mitigation strategies. It is imperative to note that this perspective exclusively addresses communication methodologies and does not offer legal, spiritual, psychological, or canonical counsel; rather, it is designed to complement such guidance and reinforce the emphasis on the Church's fundamental mission of evangelization.

2. Methodology

The current study employs a systematization of real-world crisis events to formulate practical recommendations for crisis communication within the Catholic Church, with a particular focus on the digital environment. This methodology enables the extraction of actionable strategies from the dynamics observed during digital crises. The research corpus comprised 15 distinct events across 10 Latin American and Caribbean countries: Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago. These cases, spanning from 2015 to 2025, encompass a diverse array of organizational contexts, including corporate, institutional, confessional and non-confessional, and academic entities. This varied landscape was intentionally selected to capture the nuances of crisis communication across different sectors and structures, thereby providing a solid foundation for the proposed guidelines and enhancing their applicability beyond a single organization.

The author of this article, who has directed strategic communication units and served in external advisory roles, was responsible for data collection and management. Accordingly, data were obtained using social listening tools with licenses funded by the contracting institutions, and the findings, as aggregated data, are publicly accessible for academic purposes, as in the present publication. This transparency in funding and dissemination ensured the academic integrity of this study. However, specific information related to individual organizations remains classified and protected by confidentiality agreements, ethical standards regarding privacy, and proprietary data.

2.1. Development of the Analytical Framework

In parallel, data collection for this study was conducted within the framework of three key concepts: institutional reputation, digital reputation, and crisis. Institutional reputation is characterized by the acknowledgment given by essential stakeholders, which is intricately connected to both the actual accomplishments

of the institution and, crucially, to how these accomplishments are perceived. It extends beyond merely meeting obligations and expectations in reality; it also encompasses how stakeholders view this fulfillment (Villafañe 2022). An institution might achieve its intended objectives but be regarded as inadequate if it fails to effectively communicate or publicize these achievements. On the other hand, an institution could fall short of certain goals but still maintain a positive reputation if stakeholders recognize genuine effort, extenuating circumstances, or dedication to enhancement. Consequently, an ideal situation involves a strong correlation between actions and perceptions, where actual accomplishments are recognized and appreciated by stakeholders.

Digital reputation extends an institution's conventional reputation into online domains. This virtual image reflects how institutions meet their obligations and satisfy their expectations within the digital sphere. The concept of digital reputation is composed of two primary elements: digital footprint and digital shadow. The former consists of content actively produced and disseminated online by the institution, while the latter encompasses information about the organization generated by external sources, often beyond its direct influence (Beerepoot et al. 2023; Pollák and Markovič 2022). A robust digital reputation is characterized by a favorable equilibrium between these components, where the digital shadow complements and reinforces the intended digital footprint. By contrast, a weak or compromised digital reputation occurs when the digital shadow conflicts with or eclipses the digital footprint. This balance can be assessed through various techniques, including the examination of top search engine results, sentiment analysis utilizing sophisticated language models, and the employment of dedicated social sentiment analysis tools.

According to ISO 22301, a crisis is defined as an abnormal or extraordinary event or situation that threatens an organization or community and requires a strategic, adaptive, and timely response to preserve its viability and integrity (Calder 2021). Substantial damage to digital reputation can directly lead to such threats. Negative online narratives can rapidly escalate, affecting public perception, stakeholder trust, and ultimately, an organization's ability to operate effectively. The rapidity and broad reach of digital communications can amplify unfavorable information, making it challenging to manage and potentially resulting in tangible consequences for the subject. Therefore, a significant negative shift in digital reputation, which is indicative of broader damage to institutional standing, may indicate the onset of a crisis requiring immediate and strategic intervention. The interconnection of these three components is crucial: damage to an institution's reputation often first appears in the digital realm as a negative change in digital reputation, which can then act as a harbinger of an impending crisis.

To quantitatively substantiate this analysis, the study examined social interactions across various digital platforms, specifically focusing on social media mentions. These were defined as publications initiated by third parties in which the social media account under study, either tagged or referenced by name, and

native posts, defined as those published by the account being analyzed, either as the initial contribution to a conversation or as a standalone post in the absence of interactions (Navas 2020). These data were collected using a set of diverse platforms and approaches that leveraged specialized monitoring software designed to convert unstructured textual data, such as specific words or phrases, into quantifiable metrics that are then integrated into structured databases (Lutkevich and Hildreth 2022).

For this purpose, this research utilized the social media monitoring tool Viral Media, a brand operated by Viral Media Guatemala, which functions as a reseller of Reputation's global cloud-based social listening platform (https://www.viralmedia.gt/). This tool was used to systematically extract relevant text from a diverse array of online sources, including prominent social networking sites, blogs, discussion forums, and other social media outlets. The primary indicators included the total number of mentions, distribution of mentions per platform, sentiment analysis—which evaluates the emotional valence (positive, negative, or neutral) of published content—and influencer mapping. Influencer mapping identifies actively participating individuals within the digital ecosystem, distinguishes key contributors, assesses the sentiment expressed by these individuals, and evaluates the extent of their influence.

Beyond social listening, the methodology also integrated tools specifically designed for the analysis of digital profiles and behavioral patterns. These tools provided granular statistics pertaining to user accounts, follower dynamics, and activities across social media platforms. Among the tools used were Twitonomy, a Twitter analytics tool that provides insights into user activity, follower/following dynamics, and list management (https://www.twitonomy.com/); Metricool, a social media management platform that simplifies content scheduling, provides analytics across various social media channels, facilitates competitor analysis, and enables report generation (https://metricool.com/es/); and Fanpage Karma, a social media analytics tool that offers comprehensive monitoring and analysis of social media profiles, providing insights into competitor performance, content strategies, and audience engagement (https://www.fanpagekarma.com/es/inicio/).

Furthermore, monitoring message dissemination within digital environments is critical. This involves using tools capable of tracking the spread of links from potentially unreliable sources and organizations dedicated to fact-checking. These platforms also possess the capability to calculate a bot score, which estimates the probability of an account being automated rather than human-operated. For this purpose, the tool Hoaxy, developed by the Observatory on Social Media at Indiana University, was used to visualize the online circulation of misinformation across social media, primarily on X (formerly Twitter) and BlueSky (https://hoaxy.osome.iu.edu/). Botometer X (formerly Botometer) provides pre-calculated bot scores (ranging from 0 to 5, with higher scores indicating more bot-like activity) for social media accounts based on historical data

collected before May 31, 2023 (https://botometer.osome.iu.edu/). This archival tool was used to double-check accounts' behavioral characteristics to infer their likelihood of being human or automated. All the aforementioned tools were chosen from a pool of over 90 assessed platforms based on their superior functionalities, reliability of information, capacity for historical data collection, diversity of source coverage, and favorable cost-benefit ratio (Navas 2018).

2.2. Final Analytical Framework

The empirical analysis of 15 digital crises in Latin America facilitated the identification of six critical digital reputational risk indicators. By offering key insights into online crisis dynamics and distinguishing clearly between incidents and full-scale crises, this research established a robust framework for the systematic monitoring of digital reputations and the proactive management of potential crises. These indicators serve as essential benchmarks for assessing the severity of adverse situations and informed the development of 11 strategic actions to guide the swift and appropriate implementation of digital crisis response measures. These risk indicators include:

2.2.1. Potential reach

This metric is defined as the estimated audience size that can potentially access the distributed content. This measure is fundamental for assessing whether information may be amplified in networked spaces (Castells et al. 2023). However, it is important to note that while potential reach is a significant metric, it does not necessarily equate to engagement or meaningful impact. The key-visibility threshold is determined by the follower count of users disseminating negative content. Accounts with a minimum of 10,000 followers, categorized as *nano-influencers*, have demonstrated the capacity to amplify negative sentiment within broader audiences (Şenyapar 2024). Thus, the initial factor to consider is whether followers spreading negativity have a community of more than 10,000 members. An affirmative response indicates a preliminary indication of digital crisis risk. Subsequently, it is crucial to determine the number of accounts with 10,000 or more followers that propagate negativity; the greater this number, the more severe the risk.

2.2.2. Virality

Virality is characterized by the rapid and widespread dissemination of content across digital platforms, reaching vast audiences through user-driven sharing and amplification (Rathje et al. 2023). The virality rate was determined by dividing the number of shares by the number of impressions and multiplying the result by 10 (Campbell et al. 2022). Contextualizing virality within the participation inequality rule, also referred to as the *90-9-1 rule*, is essential. This principle suggests that 90% of users are passive observers, 9% contribute sporadically, and 1%

produce the majority of content and activities (Nielsen 2006). However, recent studies have challenged the accuracy of this rule. A study on a microblogging platform found that lurkers constitute approximately 75% of users, proposing an alternative 75-24-1 ratio (Antelmi et al. 2019). While this finding indicates a higher level of user engagement than previously theorized, it remains clear that only a small portion (less than one-third) of an online community's followers consistently engage with the content. In this context, when more than 24% of an account's followers share the same negative content about the targeted account, a potential risk that may precipitate a digital crisis should be considered.

2.2.3. Sentiment

This metric quantifies the attitudes, opinions, and emotions expressed by users on social media platforms through their posts, comments, and interactions, categorizing them as positive, neutral, or negative (Li et al. 2018). Negative sentiment surpassing 50%, encompassing dissatisfied users, non-compliant users, and individuals who oppose the content shared by official organizational accounts, can indicate widespread dissatisfaction or concern among the public (Tuten et al. 2019). The situation becomes particularly concerning when this heightened negativity coincides with high-reach followers and an increasing virality rate, which necessitates prompt action. Notably, scenarios in which negative sentiment exceeds 50% definitively signify a digital crisis.

2.2.4. Influencer engagement

Influencers are prominent figures with substantial followings and reputations across diverse digital platforms (Lokithasan et al. 2019). They are typically categorized based on their reach as nano-influencers (10,000 and above), micro-influencers (10,000–100,000), and macro-influencers (100,000–1 million) (Walter et al. 2025). This reach-centric classification should be augmented by two interrelated factors: relevance, which evaluates the congruence between an influencer's content and audience interests with the promoted institution, and resonance, which quantifies the level of engagement and interaction an influencer generates from their audience (Influence Hunter 2021). Influencers' participation in a negative social media discussion community amplifies the potential for previously unaffected individuals to become involved. Consequently, it is fundamental to identify whether influencers outside of the online community engage with criticism. If three nano-influencers, two micro-influencers, or one macro-influencer disseminate negative content, it may significantly increase the probability of a crisis escalating.

2.2.5. Crossover to traditional media

This phenomenon occurs when a negative narrative originating on social media platforms extends beyond its initial context and garners attention from

traditional media. Despite the increasing prominence of social media platforms as news sources influencing public perception and decision-makers (Powers 2016), some studies suggest social media may function as a perceived corrective mechanism to counterbalance presumed biases in mainstream news reporting (Fotopoulos 2023). This expansion enhances the probability of engaging public opinion influencers, potentially amplifying the reach of negative discourse or intensifying its impact on audiences. If criticism on social media is reported as news by a reputable traditional media outlet, this signifies that the digital context is significantly affected by the dissemination of information among new offline communities that may subsequently contribute comments to the digital sphere.

2.2.6. Stakeholder impact

Key stakeholders are individuals or groups interested in or affected by an organization's actions and decisions. When negativity is amplified on social media, some stakeholders engage in intense scrutiny, prompting them to question the authenticity of claims, potential implications for their association with the institution, and the manner in which their interests might be affected. The ephemeral nature of a digital crisis can represent both a short-lived challenge and a catalyst for institutional resilience in relation to key stakeholders (Li et al. 2023). Thus, if social media discourse adversely affects two or more stakeholders in a short timeframe, it serves as a robust indicator that digital negativity may inflict tangible harm on third parties and disrupt an institution's standard operations.

The systematic assessment of the previously delineated six-criteria framework for crisis potential enables the stratification of emergent occurrences into three categories: incidents (fulfilling one to two criteria, warranting internal response and surveillance), severe incidents (meeting three to five criteria, necessitating crisis committee evaluation and potential public engagement), and crises (satisfying all six criteria, demanding prompt internal and external action). Notably, two of these criteria, involvement of influencer engagement and crossover to traditional media, have prominence as amplification mechanisms, substantially elevating the likelihood of a crisis by expanding negative discourse beyond conventional networks. This taxonomic approach, in conjunction with ongoing surveillance, promotes preemptive crisis management, facilitates evidence-based interventions, judicious resource allocation, and cultivates robust stakeholder relations to effectively navigate the ever-evolving digital milieu.

3. Results

Digital crisis communication management, typically divided into prevention, management, and mitigation phases (Browder et al. 2024; Nuortimo et al. 2024; Strauβ and Jonkman 2017), provides a relevant structure for addressing the

unique challenges the Catholic Church faces in handling sexual abuse scandals. Rather than focusing on superficial reputation repair or concealment, this study establishes a framework grounded in accountability and transparency, guided by unwavering truthfulness, a victim-centered approach, and zero tolerance for abuse. These orientations aim to prevent further member disillusionment and conversion reversals, offering pragmatic strategies for each phase to ethically navigate digital crises, thus preserving the Church's spiritual mission and restoring authentic trust.

3.1. Phase 1: Prevention

3.1.1. Continuous digital monitoring

This permanent endeavor relies on sophisticated social listening platforms for proactive reputation management. It facilitates the systematic collection and analysis of online discourse, the comprehensive assessment of an organization's digital presence, and the detection of subtle shifts in public perceptions. Key indicators—volume of mentions, virality rate, sentiment, platform allocation, influencer mapping, and semantic networks—enable trend analyses, emerging risk identification, empirical assessment of reputation management strategies, and resource distribution optimization. Continuous digital monitoring serves as a primary preventive measure by acting as an early warning system for all six risk indicators. By providing real-time insights into online discourse, it enables the Church to anticipate and mitigate potential stakeholder impacts before they escalate. In the Catholic Church context, continuous monitoring is vital for identifying and analyzing narratives surrounding sexual abuse. It allows for the identification of key participants in these conversations and distinguishes between positive actors and those engaging in harmful activities. This insight enables the Church to conceptualize and implement targeted strategies for addressing both supportive and antagonistic groups, fostering a more constructive and accountable digital environment.

3.1.2. Creating a reputational risk map

A reputational risk map is a proactive analytical instrument for identifying and mitigating potential threats to an organization's public standing. This tool evaluates vulnerabilities across operational processes, communication structures, and stakeholder engagement by employing a dual-dimensional approach to assess risk likelihood and impact severity, thereby enabling strategic prioritization and resource allocation. Continuous adaptation to the evolving digital landscape through regular reviews and modifications ensures map relevance. Creating a reputational risk map moves beyond real-time monitoring to strategic foresight, identifying systemic weaknesses within an institution that could generate negative sentiment and stakeholder impacts. By mapping these vulnerabilities, targeted

preventive measures can be implemented to reduce the likelihood of negative content gaining a high potential reach, virality, attracting influencer engagement, or crossover to traditional media. For the Catholic Church, this map is crucial for identifying specific vulnerabilities related to sexual abuse scandals, such as gaps in reporting protocols, inadequate victim support systems, and inconsistent communication practices. By mapping these risks, the Church can proactively implement measures to strengthen safeguarding policies, improve victim support, and ensure transparent communication, thereby mitigating the impact of future scandals and fostering a culture of accountability.

3.1.3. Establishing a permanent crisis committee

Effective crisis management necessitates the establishment of a committee comprising top-level representatives from key sectors. This body is tasked with formulating communication strategies, monitoring digital platforms, and orchestrating crisis response. To maintain operational preparedness, the committee must engage in regular meetings and conduct crisis simulations. When crisis indicators emerge, specialized task forces are formed, including legal professionals, communication experts, and digital strategists. These *ad hoc* groups operate under strict confidentiality protocols and dissolve following a crisis resolution. A carefully curated network of external specialists provides swift access to diverse expertise, which aids in mitigating unforeseen challenges. This action is a fundamental organizational prerequisite for effectively managing crises, centralizing decision-making, and coordinating responses across all risk indicators. The committee's role in monitoring digital platforms directly informs its assessment of potential reach, virality, sentiment, and influencer engagement. Its strategic planning and response orchestration directly address the escalation of all risks, including the potential for crossover to traditional media and stakeholder impact. Ongoing training and simulations are critical for reducing response time, which directly impacts the ability to respond within 90 minutes of a crisis outbreak and to mitigate stakeholder impact within a two-hour window. For the Catholic Church, this organizational structure is crucial for addressing sexual abuse scandals. Such situations require a core committee with proficiency in pastoral activities, canon law, and victim advocacy, supplemented by experts in trauma and psychological counseling, as well as forensic investigators, to ensure a thorough victim-oriented approach. Ensuring that responses are both legally sound and pastorally appropriate and that communication strategies prioritize victim support and transparency are of paramount importance.

3.1.4. Developing a communication crisis management manual

Formulated during routine operations, this manual is crucial for organizational resilience. It outlines communication-centric strategic aims, response frameworks, legal and ethical standards, responsibilities, and communication

action protocols, empowering designated personnel to manage crises effectively. The document must articulate procedures for various communication contexts, encompassing internal and external messaging, stakeholder interaction, and information distribution with a well-defined escalation hierarchy. Periodic assessments and revisions that integrate simulation-derived insights and emerging practices are essential to maintain pertinence. This manual is an operational blueprint that translates the strategic intent of the crisis committee into actionable steps, which are crucial for overcoming the temporal urgency of digital crises. It provides predefined protocols for managing situations characterized by high potential reach, virality, negative sentiment, influencer engagement, and crossover to traditional media, ensuring consistent messaging. As applied to the Catholic Church, this manual must incorporate specific communication directives for managing allegations of sexual abuse, prioritizing victim-oriented messaging, applying communication-related canonical processes, and transparently disclosing information to ensure uniform, ethical communication responses across dioceses. These guarantees responses are consistently aligned with the Church's victim-centered and accountability principles, which are vital for mitigating long-term sentiment and stakeholder impact.

3.1.5. Implementing spokesperson policies

The implementation of spokesperson policies is essential for controlled crisis communication, delineating authorized representatives, disclosure parameters, and communication channels to prevent disinformation and ensure alignment with organizational principles. By controlling who speaks and what is said, this policy directly manages the narrative, preventing unauthorized or inconsistent messaging that could exacerbate potential reach, virality, negative sentiment, negative influencer engagement, or crossover to traditional media. Specifically, in instances of sexual abuse scandals, bishops and archbishops must function as primary spokespersons and demonstrate institutional accountability, which necessitates comprehensive media training. For minor incidents, the communications director may serve as spokesperson; for serious incidents, a higher-ranking official; and for full-scale crises, particularly those involving sexual abuse, the highest authority. This strategic selection ensures that response severity corresponds to the specific situation and demonstrates transparency and responsibility. A clear spokesperson policy ensures that stakeholders receive accurate and timely information from credible sources, thereby reducing uncertainty and mitigating negative stakeholder impact. Within the ecclesial structure, this policy must emphasize canonical and pastoral considerations, ensuring that communication reflects both legal obligations and the Church's commitment to the care and spiritual healing of victims.

3.2. Phase 2: Crisis Management and Response

During the crisis response, management phases undergo rapid transitions, necessitating expeditious redistribution of resources and a focus on addressing imminent threats and mitigating potential harm. This period demands prompt decision-making, effective communication channels, and the capacity to adapt strategies as circumstances evolve.

3.2.1. Immediate convening of the institution's crisis committee

The pre-established crisis committee, integral to information acquisition and strategic planning, must convene for an expeditious assessment of the situation and consider expert consultation. Employing sophisticated methodologies for online discourse analysis, the committee categorizes events as incidents, serious incidents, or crises, and identifies key actors, such as critics, antagonists, or automated accounts, based on the aforementioned risk indicators. Subsequent to categorization, the committee formulates internal and external communication strategies, incorporating external expertise as necessary. The convening of the committee represents the critical transition from prevention to active management. The committee rapidly assesses the real-time status of potential reach, virality, sentiment, influencer engagement, crossover to traditional media, and stakeholder impact to categorize the crisis and inform the immediate response. This swift convening is crucial for enabling a timely public response and mitigating stakeholder impact within the critical two-hour window. Within the ecclesiastical structure, this committee must include canonical and psychological proficiency, particularly when addressing cases of sexual misconduct. Remote meetings are permissible, provided all participants have consented to stringent ethical protocols and committed to non-disclosure of any information discussed.

3.2.2. Public response within 90 minutes of crisis outbreak

The ephemeral nature of digital crises, typically lasting approximately two hours, necessitates a swift public response within 90 minutes of onset, requiring a fundamental reconfiguration of conventional response protocols. An initial public declaration in accordance with the crisis committee guidelines may be necessary. Therefore, internal stakeholders must be informed prior to public announcements to maintain organizational unity. This 90-minute response window is a critical operational directive that directly addresses the rapid pace of digital crises. Its speed is essential to preempt or counter the rapid spread of negative content, thereby influencing virality and limiting its potential reach. A timely response aims to control the initial sentiment before it solidifies or escalates beyond the 50% crisis threshold. By providing an authoritative counternarrative, it can also reduce amplification by high-reach accounts, influencer engagement, or crossover to traditional media. Crucially, a prompt public response is vital for mitigating adverse effects on stakeholders within the critical two-hour window,

providing reassurance and demonstrating institutional control. In the context of the Church's response, social media communication should be cohesive and uniform and avoid individualized responses during critical periods. Requests for additional information via private messaging should be redirected to arrange formal consultations when deemed essential. The choice of response mechanisms—be they official pronouncements, media briefings, or social media engagement—should be determined by the severity of the crisis and, in cases of sexual abuse scandals, should invariably adhere to victim-centric principles and canonical standards.

3.2.3. Responding with empathy, accountability, and transparency

Empathy, with its cognitive, emotional, and compassionate dimensions, coupled with transparency, which demands clarity and truthfulness, forms the cornerstone of effective communication strategies (Navas 2022). When addressing sexual abuse through digital platforms, these principles manifest as transparent communication, characterized by clarity, factuality, responsibility, sincerity, timeliness, consistency, focus, and openness. Careful selection of language, tone, and delivery methods is critical to ensure that all communication reflects an unwavering commitment to truth, victim well-being, and accountability. This type of communication is an ethical imperative underpinning all effective crisis responses. While speed manages the spread of negativity, empathy, accountability, and transparency are essential for addressing the root cause of negative sentiment and rebuilding authentic trust. This approach directly aims to shift negative sentiment by demonstrating genuine concern, taking responsibility, and providing factual information. Empathetic and transparent communication is vital for reassuring affected stakeholders, addressing their concerns, and mitigating tangible harm. Responses characterized by these principles are more likely to be viewed favorably by credible influencers and traditional media, potentially leading to more balanced reporting and counter amplification. Although it does not directly control potential reach or virality, a credible and empathetic message can reduce the impact of negative reach and virality by fostering trust and encouraging a more positive reception of information. In the context of the Church's response, this approach necessitates giving precedence to victim narratives, openly acknowledging institutional shortcomings, and consistently demonstrating a dedication to restorative justice and protective measures. Such actions rebuild trust and promote healing within the affected community.

3.3. Phase 3: Mitigation and Recovery

The mitigation phase of crisis communication is crucial for minimizing long-term impact and facilitating recovery. These elements help organizations transition from crisis management to long-term recovery, learning, and improvement.

3.3.1. Periodic accountability

In the realm of digital crisis management, a comprehensive approach transcends damage control, necessitating a transparent demonstration of institutional accountability and dedication to positive transformation. The absence of communication following a crisis can significantly erode trust; hence, it is crucial to present a narrative that clearly illustrates accountability with a focus on victim reparation, victim-centric protocols, and procedural improvements. This narrative should encompass detailed accounts of crisis response measures, ongoing initiatives, and acquired insights while providing transparent information on victim welfare and the cultivation of a safety-oriented culture. To avoid subjective interpretations, it is imperative to rely on factual and verifiable information rooted in demonstrable actions. Periodic accountability represents a long-term commitment that differentiates genuine institutional change from mere crisis containment. It directly addresses long-term negative sentiment and stakeholder trust by demonstrating ongoing commitment to addressing root causes and making amends. By addressing the root causes and fostering a safety-oriented culture, the likelihood of future negative content gaining high potential reach and virality is reduced. Within the context of the Church's communication strategy, this approach mandates public disclosure of canonical investigation procedures, implementation of robust safeguarding policies, and continuous support for survivors. Such measures demonstrate an unwavering commitment to restorative justice and the prevention of future abuse in the ecclesiastical community.

3.3.2. Stakeholder engagement

In particularly sensitive crises, such as sexual abuse, it is imperative to prioritize victim welfare while strategically cultivating relationships with key opinion leaders, including journalists, to ensure balanced reporting. This approach requires active listening, proactive development of counterarguments, and timely dissemination of information. Targeted public relations efforts should provide journalists with accurate information, prompt responses, and positive narratives that emphasize recovery and reform. Engagement with other stakeholders, including collaborators and the faithful, through open dialogue and forums is essential for restoring trust and demonstrating accountability. Stakeholder engagement is a relational aspect of crisis mitigation. While accountability demonstrates what an institution is doing, engagement focuses on how it communicates and interacts with those affected. It directly addresses the needs and concerns of affected stakeholders, fostering dialogue and rebuilding trust. Proactive engagement with journalists and key opinion leaders aims to influence their reporting and commentary, providing balanced or positive narratives to counter negative amplification from crossover to traditional media and influencer engagement. Direct engagement and open dialogue can help shift negative sentiment by allowing stakeholders to voice their concerns and witness the institution's

commitment to reform. By influencing key communicators, it can indirectly affect the potential reach and virality of positive or neutral narratives in the media. The Church's outreach should prioritize direct engagement with survivors, foster transparent dialogue with the faithful, and utilize trusted media channels to disseminate information about safeguarding measures and restorative justice efforts, thereby rebuilding trust and promoting healing among the faithful.

3.3.3. Self-assessment of communication responses

A comprehensive post-crisis review that analyzes response strategies and their effectiveness is essential for institutional governance and resilience. Systematic documentation of communication-related lessons learned from protocol revisions ensures adaptability to changing circumstances. Mitigation efforts must extend beyond public image restoration, focusing on reinforcing the Church's evangelizing mission, addressing root causes, and prioritizing internal healing. This self-assessment constitutes a critical learning component of the crisis management cycle, transforming a crisis from a damaging event into a valuable learning opportunity. By analyzing the effectiveness of past responses to specific risk factors (e.g., how well a response mitigated virality or stakeholder impact), the Church can refine its strategies for future incidents, thereby enhancing its overall preparedness and reducing the likelihood and severity of future crises related to all six indicators. This feedback loop directly informs and strengthens all preventive measures (e.g., refining the risk map, updating the communication manual), thereby reducing the likelihood of future negative sentiment and stakeholder impact and improving the institution's capacity to manage potential reach and virality. Within the Church's evaluative process, this review should specifically examine the efficacy of messaging strategies, victim support outreach, and the transparency of disclosures related to canonical procedures. This ensures that insights directly contribute to preventing future failures and restoring trust in the ecclesial community.

Figure 1 visually delineates the intricate relationships between the 11 strategic crisis management actions and the six digital crisis risk indicators. Organized by the distinct phases of crisis management—prevention, management, and mitigation—this comprehensive chart illustrates how each proactive measure and responsive intervention directly or indirectly addresses, mitigates, or enables the management of specific risk dimensions, thereby underscoring the integrated nature of the proposed framework for ecclesial resilience.

Figure 1. Relationships Between Digital Crisis Risk Indicators and Crisis Management Actions.

Crisis management action \ Risk factor	**Potential reach**	**Virality**	**Sentiment**	**Influencer engagement**	**Crossover to Traditional media**	**Stakeholder impact**
Phase 1: Prevention						
1. Continuous Digital Monitoring	Directly monitors	Directly monitors	Directly monitors	Directly monitors	Indirectly monitors	Indirectly monitors
2. Creating a Reputational Risk Map	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause
3. Establishing a Permanent Crisis Committee	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response
4. Developing a Communication Crisis Management Manual	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Mitigates impact
5. Implementing Spokesperson Policies	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Mitigates impact
Phase 2: Crisis Management and Response						
1. Immediate Convening of the Committee	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response

2. Public Response within 90 Minutes	Mitigates spread	Mitigates spread	Mitigates impact	Mitigates amplification	Mitigates amplification	Mitigates impact
3. Responding with Empathy, Accountability, and Transparency	Builds trust	Builds trust	Shifts perception	Builds trust	Builds trust	Restores trust
Phase 3: Mitigation and Recovery						
1. Periodic Accountability	Builds resilience	Builds resilience	Restores trust	Builds trust	Builds trust	Restores trust
2. Stakeholder Engagement	Influences narrative	Influences narrative	Restores trust	Influences narrative	Influences narrative	Restores trust
3. Self-Assessment of Communication Responses	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response

Source: Albertina Navas

This illustration reveals several key insights regarding the interconnectedness of crisis management. This clearly demonstrates that actions within the prevention phase, such as *continuous digital monitoring* and *creating a reputational risk map*, primarily serve to identify and address the root causes or early signs of all six risk indicators, laying a foundation for preparedness. During the management phase, actions such as the *immediate convening of the committee* and *public response within 90 minutes* are designed for rapid intervention, directly enabling or mitigating the immediate spread, impact, and amplification associated with high potential reach, virality, negative sentiment, influencer engagement, crossover to traditional media, and stakeholder impact. Finally, the mitigation phase, encompassing *periodic accountability, stakeholder engagement*, and *self-assessment of communication responses*, focuses on long-term recovery and resilience, aiming to restore trust, shift perceptions, and improve future responses across all risk dimensions. This

comprehensive mapping underscores that effective digital crisis management is a dynamic, multifaceted endeavor in which each action plays a crucial role in navigating the complex interplay of digital risks.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Successful navigation of digital crises in the Catholic Church hinges on a deeply integrated framework that proactively identifies and monitors digital risks, responds with speed and ethical integrity, and commits to long-term accountability and healing. The Church faces a severe credibility crisis due to widespread sexual abuse scandals, further intensified by the pervasive influence of social media and a trust deficit that profoundly threatens its fundamental evangelization mission. This ephemeral nature of digital crises, coupled with the profound impact of sexual abuse scandals, necessitates a comprehensive and principled approach that transcends conventional reputation management, demanding a strategy that incorporates expert communication techniques, cutting-edge technological tools, and an unwavering commitment to empathy, accountability, and transparency. The urgency of this approach stems from the critical need to restore institutional integrity and address deep-seated disillusionment in the faithful.

The Church's reputation concerns transcend mere surface-level image management; the trust erosion caused by these scandals results in profound disenchantment among existing members and impedes conversion processes. Consequently, the Church must openly communicate its initiatives to address abuse cases, implement stringent safeguarding protocols, and cultivate a protective environment. This proactive communication approach not only aids in rebuilding trust but also demonstrates the institution's dedication to its evangelization mission by highlighting its commitment to justice and healing. Technological advancement is no longer optional for the Church; digital tools must be embraced for data gathering, community engagement, and combating disinformation. The utilization of advanced social listening platforms and analytical tools allows the Church to gauge public sentiment, identify emerging narratives, and preemptively address false information, thereby enabling informed decision-making, enhancing community relationships, and equipping the Church to effectively guide its followers in an increasingly digital landscape.

The communication guidelines presented here, derived from a systematic analysis of real-world crises and subjected to continuous refinement, offer a robust framework for managing digital crises. These strategies, grounded in the analysis of institutional and digital reputations, emphasize proactive prevention, strategic management, and comprehensive mitigation. The employed methodologies, including performance-impact modeling and social media analytics, ensure that the guidelines are evidence-based and adaptable to a dynamic digital environment. Based on this analysis, actionable recommendations for the Catholic

Church include prioritizing resources for sophisticated continuous digital monitoring systems and dedicated personnel to interpret data. These actions would enabling the proactive identification of emerging threats related to potential reach, virality, and sentiment for early intervention before incidents escalate.

Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure that the principles of empathy, accountability, transparency, and victim-centeredness are not merely stated values but are deeply integrated into all crisis management protocols, training, and decision-making processes, particularly concerning sexual abuse allegations, where moral integrity is paramount for restoring trust. The Church must also continuously train the permanent crisis committee, conduct regular simulations, and refine communication manuals and spokesperson policies; doing so would strengthen internal preparedness and agility, ensuring rapid, coordinated, and consistent responses within the critical 90-minute window to mitigate immediate harm and control the narrative. Developing robust strategies for cultivating relationships with key stakeholders, including abuse survivors, the faithful, and journalists, is essential for proactive stakeholder and media engagement. This approach will foster trust and ensure accurate, balanced reporting that supports restorative justice efforts and counters negative amplification from traditional media and influencers.

Finally, the Church should establish clear processes for periodic accountability reports and comprehensive post-crisis self-assessments to commit to ongoing accountability and learning. This strategy ensures that lessons learned lead to continuous improvement in safeguarding policies, victim support, and communication strategies, thereby reinforcing the Church's long-term resilience and spiritual mission.

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A Critique on the Solution of Zakzewoski's Virtue Responsibilism to the Gettier Problem

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ABSTRACT

Edmund Gettier demonstrated that the traditional analysis of knowledge (as a justified true belief) is insufficient. Some philosophers have proposed that virtue epistemology holds the key to solving the Gettier problem. Among them, Zagzebski's virtue responsibilism has gained significant popularity. This solution posits that knowledge is a belief state originating from acts of intellectual virtue, where these acts are driven by intellectually virtuous motivations, the cognizer successfully achieves the ultimate goal of motivation (truth and understanding) through these acts. In other words, knowledge (truth) is attained because of the operation of one's intellectual virtues. This revision of the traditional analysis of knowledge purportedly escapes the problems identified in the Gettier cases. In this paper, I argue that Zagzebski's definition of knowledge is problematic as it cannot be proven that intellectual virtue is a necessary condition for knowledge. Furthermore, in the metaphysical context of mind–things dualism, it is unrealistic to attempt to establish a stable and reliable connection between intellectual virtue (the mind) and truth (the external world). In short, the intellectual virtue of epistemic agent cannot guarantee the acquisition of knowledge. It is not the key to solving the Gettier problem.

Keywords: *Gettier problem, Zagzebski, virtue responsibilism, virtue epistemology, intellectual virtue, cognitive character*

1. The Gettier Problem

When philosophers attempt to understand the nature of knowledge, they inevitably confront the Gettier problem. The traditional definition of knowledge holds that knowledge is justified true belief (JTB). However, is every justified true belief knowledge? Consider the following scenario:

> Messi is currently in Beijing. Suppose one day you are driving past the Beijing Olympic Sports Center, and from your car, you see someone on the field who looks exactly like Messi playing football. At the same time, the news reports that Messi has arrived in Beijing that day. As a result, you form the belief [Messi is currently in Beijing]. However, the person on the field is a robot replica of Messi, identical in height, appearance, and athletic ability. What you did not know is that Messi *is* indeed in Beijing at that moment, but not at the stadium you passed; he is at a different location.

In this example, you hold a justified true belief: the proposition [Messi is currently in Beijing] is true since Messi is indeed in Beijing, albeit at a different location. You believe this proposition and have justified grounds for doing so—the news reported Messi's arrival in Beijing, and you saw someone on the field who looked exactly like him. However, you do not genuinely know that Messi is in Beijing because the person you saw was not actually Messi. Through such cases, Gettier demonstrated that JTB conditions (justification, truth, and belief) might be necessary for knowledge, but they do not "state a sufficient condition for someone's knowing a given proposition" Gettier 1963, 123).

The core of the Gettier problem is that a justified true belief is true by chance; thus, it cannot be conceived as knowledge. The issue of epistemic luck poses a significant challenge to the traditional definition of knowledge, leading many philosophers to propose new theories, such as virtue epistemology (Zagzebski 1996; Sosa 2007, 2009; Greco 2010; Baehr 2011; Pritchard 2003), to supplement or revise traditional accounts of knowledge. Virtue responsibilist Zagzebski argues that there is a valuable relationship between the knower and the truth, where the knower has significant agency in the cognitive structure and, as a result, bears responsibility for possessing or failing to possess knowledge. Zagzebski's point seems attractive. The remainder of the paper will examine Zagzebski's virtue responsibilism as a case, exploring whether a virtue-based account of knowledge can rescue epistemologists from the dilemma and effectively address the issue of epistemic luck in justifying knowledge.

2. Virtue Responsibilism

Zagzebski posts that the nature of the Gettier problem lies in the issue that bad luck is offset by good luck so that the epistemic agent happens to hit a justified true belief (viz. epistemic luck or a lucky guess). Thus, she asserts that "as long as the concept of knowledge closely connects the justification component and the truth component, but permits some degree of independence between them, justified true belief will never be sufficient for knowledge" (Zagzebski 1994, 69). In other words, as long as the nature of knowledge is understood as a relationship between the epistemic agent and the truth that exists independently of the agent, then the certainty of knowledge will never be attainable. Undoubtedly, this judgment is correct. Zagzebski argues that an effective way to bridge the gap between justification and truth is to focus on the knower, specifically by establishing a stable and reliable relationship between the intellectual virtue of the knower and the truth. Consequently, Zagzebski introduces intellectual virtue and moral responsibility into epistemology, emphasizing the virtuous dimension of knowledge. Responsibility is clearly a moral term; virtue responsibilism implies that an epistemic agent bears responsibility for having or not having knowledge (Zagzebski 1996, 261), and he can get things right by virtue of his abilities, efforts, and actions (Greco 2003). As Zagzebski states, "Knowledge is not merely something that happens to us but is something to which we contribute through our own efforts and skills" (Zagzebski 1996, 261). In Zagzebski's view, both moral and intellectual virtues can enable individuals to process and evaluate information preferably, reducing the influence of luck in the acquisition of knowledge and facilitating the attainment of genuinely reliable knowledge, more effectively addressing the Gettier problem.

Zagzebski argues that "the justification of a belief can be defined in terms of intellectual virtue in the same way the rightness of an act can be defined in terms of moral virtue" (Zagzebski 1996, 38). Thus, her approach to epistemology focuses on the virtues of the epistemic agent, situates the concept of knowledge within the domain of ethics, and tries to make "a conceptual connection between truth and the sense in which knowledge is good" (Zagzebski 1999, 104). This intertwining of knowledge and ethics reinforces the idea that the character traits and virtues of the knower play a pivotal role in the epistemic process, shaping both the reliability of knowledge and the moral landscape in which it exists. In other words, a virtuous knower is better equipped to navigate the complexities of cognitive inquiry. Following this line of thought, Zagzebski begins her account of knowledge with "a detailed and systematic treatment of the structure of a virtue" (Baehr 2019). Zagzebski's theory of knowledge posits that successful cognition is driven by virtue, particularly by a love of truth. It is the presence of virtuous motivations that bring added value to knowledge (Dougherty 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the concepts of virtue and intellectual virtue

within Zagzebski's epistemological framework to clarify how these virtues shape the process of knowing.

2.1. The Concept of Virtue

Zagzebski adopts Aristotle's position, viewing virtue as a state of the soul, a character trait that is acquired through cultivation and practice. She defines virtue, whether moral or intellectual, as follows:

> Def 1: A virtue, then, can be defined as a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end. What I mean by a motivation is a disposition to have a motive; a motive is an action-guiding emotion with a certain end, either internal or external. (Zagzebski 1996, 137)

The concept of virtue in Zagzebski's theoretical framework possesses the following characteristics:

(i) Virtue is an acquired excellence of the soul. This contrasts with Sosa's (2007) perspective, which posits that virtue encompasses not only innate capacities, such as vision, hearing, and memory, but also acquired traits such as introspection. However, Zagzebski argues that virtue refers to excellent character traits developed through experience and repeated practice, independent of innate abilities. As such, acquiring virtue requires time and effort; however, once acquired, virtue becomes a deeply rooted and enduring quality.

(ii) Virtue differs from skill in that it requires active functioning. Skills can exist without being put to use, whereas virtue only exists when exercised in the appropriate context. This distinction emphasizes that virtue is context dependent and must be actively practiced in moral or cognitive situations to be realized. Moreover, a virtuous person is typically expected to possess the relevant skills to effectively practice virtue; however, these skills do not have the intrinsic value of virtue.

(iii) Motivation and reliable success are necessary components of virtue. According to Zagzebski, motivation is defined by its ultimate goal and the emotions underlying it. The goodness of the outcomes produced by that motivation (i.e., reliable success) defines the goodness of the action, and both the motivation and its resulting outcomes are core components of virtue. In other words, a person is virtuous if and only if he successfully achieves the goals of virtuous motivation.

In summary, a virtue is expressed as a good action that is driven by a good motivation and directed toward a good end, arriving at reliable success in achieving that good end. For Zagzebski, the definition is broad enough to encompass intellectual and moral virtues, as well as other forms such as aesthetic and religious virtues.

2.2. Intellectual Virtue

Virtue consists of virtuous motivation and reliable success in achieving the goals of that motivation. Consequently, Zagzebski proposes that intellectual virtue be defined through reflective admiration of exemplars and connect it with these two components, namely, "the individual intellectual virtues can be defined in terms of motivations arising from the general motivation for knowledge and reliability in attaining the aims of these motives" (Zagzebski 1996, 166). Therefore, she defines intellectual virtue as follows:

> Def 2: An intellectual virtue is a deep and enduring acquired intellectual excellence consisting of an admirable intellectual motive disposition and reliable success in reaching the truth *because of* the behavior to which that motive leads. (Zagzebski 2019, 32)

It is obvious that motivation and reliable success are key components that constitute intellectual virtue in Zagzebski's definition. She holds that the motivation behind acquiring knowledge is the genuine desire to know, the epistemic agent guided by a commitment to epistemic values such as truth, understanding, and intellectual humility to take action. A virtuous motive is crucial because it aligns the knower's intentions with the pursuit of truth. Like virtue, intellectual virtue is a term of success; it indicates that the epistemic agent succeeds in his or her aim (truth, understanding), which involves possessing the cognitive skills, intellectual virtues, and the right kind of cognitive environment. While the core elements of this definition—intellectual motivation and reliable success—appear to be relatively straightforward, the details involved warrant further analysis.

First, all intellectual virtues share the same ultimate end: *truth and understanding* (viz., knowledge). Zagzebski divided the ends of intellectual virtue into two types: the first are ultimate ends, such as truth and understanding, which are shared by all intellectual virtues; and the second are immediate ends, which differ from virtue to virtue. She claimed that "a wide range of intellectual virtues arise out of the same general motivation; the motivation for knowledge, and have the same general aim: knowledge" (Zagzebski 1996, 176). Thus, the distinction among different intellectual virtues lies in the immediate ends, which are what the motivation is aimed for, rather than the ultimate ends. For example, the immediate end of intellectual courage is to uphold a belief or inquiry in the face of pressures to give it up, whereas the immediate end of open-mindedness is the genuine consideration of the merits of others' perspectives, even when these perspectives

conflict with one's own views. The different types of intellectual virtue motivations may lead to a wide variety of ways in which a cognitive agent forms beliefs and acts. Ultimately, however, their goal is the same: a commitment to truth and understanding.

Second, having intellectual virtue indicates that an individual must achieve *reliable success* in achieving the end (immediate and ultimate) *through or by virtue of* the behavior guided by the motive. For example, someone is intellectually courageous if and only if he or she persists in holding a belief or pursuing an inquiry out of a desire for truth and indeed achieves reliable success (i.e., attaining truth) in this endeavor. However, this does not imply that all actions driven by admirable motivations will necessarily succeed since "motivation can be deficient or distorted in many ways, leading to intellectual vices" (Zagzebski 1996, 170). Moreover, even if the cognitive subject is motivated appropriately—either excessively or insufficiently—success is not guaranteed. Zagzebski underscores the importance of the deep-seated or habituated nature of virtue. She argues that "the more that virtuous motivations and the resulting behavior become fixed habits, the more they are able to reliably achieve the ends of the virtue in those cases in which there are contrary tendencies to be overcome" (Zagzebski 1996, 178). However, this weak connection between motivation and success leaves room for the intrusion of epistemic luck.

Third, Zagzebski further claims that all intellectual virtues are *truth conducive*. The motivation for knowledge encourages the cognitive subject to acquire behavioral patterns that facilitate the pursuit of truth. Furthermore, intellectual virtues such as intellectual creativity and intellectual open-mindedness are essential traits for the advancement of human knowledge. Zagzebski holds that an open-minded person's reliable success in being open-minded is truth conducive. Therefore, "the beliefs she forms out of openmindedness are truth conducive" (Zagzebski 1996, 185). In summary, for Zagzebski, possessing intellectual virtues means that the subject is driven by intellectually virtuous motivations, which have truth and understanding as their ultimate ends and achieve reliable success in reaching those ends (truth and knowledge) through virtue-guided actions. Thus, the interplay among motivation, action, and reliable success is fundamental to achieving truth within her framework of virtue epistemology.

Moreover, Zagzebski treated intellectual virtues as a subset of moral virtues. Some moral virtues logically entail intellectual virtues, and they are "causally necessary for intellectual virtues" (Zagzebski 1996, 159). For instance, honesty is often regarded as a moral virtue, but to be an honest person, one must be concerned with the truth, which involves intellectual engagement. In other words, "the processes related to the two kinds of virtue [intellectual and moral] do not function independently" (Zagzebski 1996, 139). In practice, they work together in the process of belief formation and justification. Zagzebski argues that the only theoretical distinction between intellectual virtues and other moral virtues lies in their motivating elements. "All of the intellectual virtues have the same

foundational motivation—knowledge, and all of the other moral virtues have different foundational motivation" (Zagzebski 1996, 166). Thus, intellectual virtues are a form of moral virtue, which implies a close relationship between knowledge and moral concepts. In Zagzebski's theory, knowledge is realized through virtuous actions in the process of acquiring intellectual virtues.

2.3. Zagzebski's Account of Knowledge

Zagzebski argues that "Gettier problems arises for any definition in which knowledge is true belief plus something else that is closely connected with truth but does not entail it" (Zagzebski 1999, 101). Thus, she claims that the solution to this problem lies in ensuring that the truth condition of knowledge must be *entailed* by the other conditions. Furthermore, she seeks to closely connect knowledge with moral concepts, arguing that the definition of knowledge should establish a conceptual link between truth and the sense in which knowledge is inherently good. Consequently, she maintains that "the normative component of knowledge, the component that makes knowledge good, must entail the truth. Success in reaching the truth must be an intrinsic part of the sense in which each instance of knowledge is good" (Zagzebski 1999, 105). Therefore, Zagzebski defines knowledge as follows:

> Def 3: Knowledge is a state of belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue.
>
> Def 4*:* An act of intellectual virtue A is an act that arises from the motivational component of A, is something a person with virtue A would (probably) do in the circumstances, is successful in achieving the end of the A motivation and is such that the agent acquires a true belief (cognitive contact with reality) *through* these features of the act.(Zagzebski 1996, 270)

According to these definitions, the justification of knowledge comprises three components: virtuous motivation (justification 1), intellectually virtuous acts (justification 2) driven by this motivation, and reliable success (justification 3) of those acts. The crucial concept is the act of intellectual virtue in definition 3, which serves as the *source* of truth. An act of intellectual virtue is an act of "getting everything right": it involves a motivation grounded in intellectual virtue, doing what a person possessing intellectual virtues would do in that situation, and ultimately attaining truth through this virtuous action "[s]ince part of what it is to perform an act of intellectual virtue is to reach the truth or to form a true belief, and to do so through certain virtuous motives and acts" (Baehr 2019). As we mentioned earlier, every intellectual virtue has two types of ends: the same ultimate ends (knowledge/truth) and various distinct immediate ends. Zagzebski claims that "an act of intellectual virtue not only is motivated by the particular virtue and expresses the agent's possession of the motivational component of the virtue but is successful in reaching both the immediate and the ultimate aim of

that virtue, which is to say, it must lead to the truth because of the operation of the virtue" (Zagzebski 1996, 259). This suggests that there must be a causal relationship between truth and acts of intellectual virtue. Therefore, truth is already implicit in the concept of the act of intellectual virtue. This is why Zagzebski simply describes knowledge as a belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue rather than as a true belief.

Notably, there is a distinction between exhibiting intellectual virtues and performing acts of intellectual virtue. According to Zagzebski, exhibiting an intellectual virtue in a particular situation does not necessarily imply that the action is motivated by the intellectual virtue itself, nor does it guarantee that the agent will successfully attain truth or knowledge as a result of exercising that virtue. For example, in Gettier's first case, Smith forms the belief that "the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" (Gettier 1963, 122), and Smith may indeed have exhibited intellectual virtues, such as intellectual attentiveness, carefulness and induction. However, since Smith does not reach the truth through or by virtue of his act of intellectual virtue, his display of intellectual virtue in the formation of the belief cannot be considered an example of performing an intellectual virtue action. Smith does not meet Zagzebski's conditions for knowledge and lacks knowledge in this case.

3. The Validity of Zagzebski's Theory

Zagzebski defines knowledge as a state of cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue, arguing that this definition is immune to the Gettier problem. Zagzebski embeds truth into the concept of intellectual virtue and takes this concept as one of the conditions for justification. That is, justification entails truth. By doing so, the gap between justification and truth is purportedly bridged. Consequently, Zagzebski asserts that the close connection between intellectual virtue and truth guarantees the truth of a proposition. Thus, she states:

> In the case of the belief Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona, the belief may exhibit intellectual virtue since it is acquired on good evidence and there is no reason to suspect Jones is lying about his new car, but the belief does not arise out of an act of intellectual virtue, because the truth is not acquired through virtuous motives or processes. The truth is not obtained because of the virtues. The truth is acquired because by accident Brown is in Barcelona..(Zagzebski 1996, 296)

That is, the key to knowledge lies in the formation of beliefs that should be *grounded in virtue,* specifically, acts of intellectual virtue. If truth is the result of luck rather than obtained through acts of intellectual virtue or reached because of virtue, then such a belief is not the case of knowledge. According to Def 3,

knowledge is derived from the reliable success of intellectually virtuous acts driven by intellectually virtuous motivations. Now, consider the following scenario:

> Jones taking the exam Professor Smith has a student named Jones, who, in Smith's memory, has consistently performed well in past exams, assignments, and class participation. Based on this, Professor Smith believes that Jones is a diligent and intelligent student who typically performs well in exams. One day, Professor Smith learns that the school will conduct a surprise exam. Drawing on his memory, observations, and analysis of Jones's academic performance and abilities, Smith reasonably infers that Jones is likely to achieve a high score on this exam. As a result, Professor Smith believes the proposition: Jones will score highly on this surprise exam.
>
> Professor Smith's evidence includes:
>
> (1) Jones has exhibited a high level of academic motivation and integrity in the past.
>
> (2) Jones has performed exceptionally well in all past exams, almost never receiving a grade lower than A.
>
> (3) Jones spends a significant amount of time studying and reviewing every day.

However, unexpectedly, Jones developed a high fever the day before the exam and was unable to attend. Fortunately, the school's system malfunctioned, which caused the exam to be postponed for several days, providing enough time for Jones to recover and ultimately perform well on the exam.

Professor Smith's belief is indeed true and justified; however, Smith does not genuinely know the truth of the proposition [Jones will score highly on this surprise exam]. In this case, Professor Smith's belief is driven by his intellectual virtue, specifically his desire for truth—whether Jones will indeed perform well on this exam. Thus, Smith is motivated by intellectually virtuous motivations (justification Condition 1) and takes intellectually virtuous acts (justification Condition 2), such as intellectual prudent observations, intellectual reasonable inferences, and the discreet formation of beliefs on the basis of reliable evidence. However, the motivation and actions did not produce reliable success (i.e., truth) for Smith. Where, then, does the problem lie?

According to Zagzebski, that Smith does not have knowledge is because the truth acquisition of his belief [Jones will score highly on this surprise exam] is not grounded in his intellectual virtues but rather in coincidental circumstances (the exam being postponed owing to the school's system failure). Even though Smith was motivated by intellectual virtue and acted virtuously, he did not reach the truth *because of* intellectual virtuous acts. In other words, Smith does not obtain cognitive contact with reality (i.e., truth) through or by virtue of his intellectual virtue and corresponding actions. He fails to establish a reliable success or causal connection between his justification (intellectually virtuous act) and truth, leading to his lack of knowledge. Therefore, according to Zagzebski, the condition for

knowledge is that the attainment of truth is ultimately grounded in or causally connected to the intellectual virtue of the subject, viz., the truth is acquired through or by virtue of intellectual virtue. By requiring that the knower obtain the truth through or because of intellectual virtue, Zagzebski's theory can effectively exclude cases in which true belief is obtained through nonvirtuous or even accidental means. In doing so, it can identify the interference of epistemic luck and distinguish knowledge from mere true belief through the lens of intellectual virtues. This suggests that Zagzebski's theory can effectively identify situations in which beliefs are accidentally true and demonstrates that it possesses a certain validity in addressing typical Gettier cases.

4. The Problem of Zagzebski's Solution

Zagzebski's theory of knowledge appears highly attractive, producing intuitively correct conclusions in the aforementioned and similar Gettier cases. However, the sufficiency of this definition is debatable, the theory is far from fully developed, and many ambiguities remain that require further clarification.

4.1. How Can Intellectual Virtue Inherently Entail the Truth?

Zagzebski argues that the root of the Gettier problem lies in some degree of independence between justification and truth. To eliminate this independence, Zagzebski embeds truth directly within the justification condition of knowledge (intellectual virtue) to ensure that the justification inherently entails truth. As stated before, Zagzebski's account of knowledge consists of three components: virtuous motivation, the corresponding acts driven by this motivation, and the reliable success of those acts. The definition can be restructured as follows:

> Knowledge = intellectually virtuous motivation (justification Condition 1) + intellectually virtuous acts (justification Condition 2) + reliable success of these acts (justification Condition 3).

This equation involves the following presupposition: necessarily, all instances of knowledge are accompanied by a "truth-oriented motive." She defines knowledge as a belief that achieves reliable success (truth) by virtue of the virtuous motive (for truth). In other words, the epistemic agent necessarily attains truth by virtue of or because of the exercise of intellectual virtue (motive, acts, and reliable success of intellectual virtue). It makes intellectual virtue the source of truth, and intellectual virtue entails truth. The concept of intellectual virtue purportedly establishes a connection between the epistemic agent and truth, thereby bridging the gap between them and safeguarding the truth. The question is, how do intellectual virtues inherently entail truth, and in what manner do they do so?

In fact, according to the definition of intellectual virtues, truth is *artificially* stipulated and embedded in the concept itself. The acquisition of knowledge requires the simultaneous fulfillment of Conditions 1, 2, and 3. In Condition 3, reliable success refers to the intellectual virtue-driven action that achieves success both at the immediate end of the intellectual virtue's motivation (which varies depending on the specific virtue) and at the ultimate end (truth and understanding). In other words, truth derives from the exercise of intellectual virtue in Zagzebski's theory. Does this imply that intellectual virtues and the corresponding action necessarily result in truth? Is there a necessary causation between intellectual virtue and truth? If so, what is the nature of this relationship, and what is its ontological foundation? Furthermore, if there is truly a necessary causation between them, how might this causation be achieved within the framework of Western philosophical dualism? If intellectual virtue truly possesses such attributes that are causally related to truth, it must mediate and harmonize the relationships between the subject and the object, thinking and being, as well as the internal and external worlds. This suggests that intellectual virtue should exhibit a mediating quality or intersubjectivity that bridges the divide between subject and object. To explore this, one might consider whether intellectual virtues inherently possess an ontological structure that aligns the subjective experiences of the knower with the objective nature of truth. For instance, if intellectual virtues are understood as dispositions that guide individuals toward truth, they might enable the subject to engage with reality in a manner that transcends subjective belief, fostering a deeper alignment with objective states of affairs.

However, I argue that this is unrealistic, if not entirely impossible. The concepts of intellectual virtue and its corresponding acts are constructed by Zagzebski. This means that the connection between intellectual virtue and truth, as well as its ability to bridge subjects and objects, is prescriptive in nature. Zagzebski posits that all intellectual virtues ultimately aim at truth or understanding. Consequently, the source of truth is embedded into the conditions of justification (intellectual virtue), which does not necessarily imply that the subject has established a substantive connection with the external world. As a result, the guarantee of truth remains elusive, as it relies on a predefined framework rather than an ontological link to reality. This raises critical questions about the efficacy of such a framework in addressing cognitive complexities and the relationship between the knower and the known facts. Thus, the truth-connecting capacity of intellectual virtues and the effectiveness of this capacity require justification.

Furthermore, intellectual virtue, as an integral part of the inner self, originates from the excellence of the soul and is inherently marked by subjectivity; this subjectivity is irreconcilable. The metaphysical systems within the Western tradition presuppose two independent worlds: the inner self (human mind) and the external world (the substantial world). Beings exist as things-in-itself that are independent of the human mind. This leads to dualism between the mind and

things, between the subject and the object, and between thinking and being. The nature of knowledge is understood as a cognitive contact between the subject and reality (which exists independently of the subject). Within this metaphysical and ontological framework, attempting to bridge the gap between the subject of knowledge (the mind) and the object of knowledge (the beings) through intellectual virtue is unrealistic. Zagzebski's solution, in fact, still implicitly carries the metaphysical presupposition of mind–object dualism. While she attempts to guarantee truth through intellectual virtues, the underlying metaphysical assumption remains the same: that things (including truth) exist independently of the subject and that the subject must establish a connection between the internal and the external world through intellectual virtues as intermediaries. Such a theoretical attempt is doomed to failure because it is impossible to bridge the gap between the subject (mind) and the object (things) of knowledge under the metaphysical system of the mind-things dichotomy. Therefore, unless there is a fundamental shift in how we understand the nature of knowledge or in the corresponding metaphysical framework, the gap between the subject and truth will remain unbridgeable, and the Gettier problem will never be fully resolved. In summary, it remains unclear on what metaphysical basis the justification of knowledge (intellectual virtue) can entail truth. The relationship between intellectual virtues and truth or knowledge is unclear and requires justification.

4.2 What Does the *State of Belief* Mean?

What does Zagzebski mean by the state of belief when she asserts that knowledge is a state of belief attained because of the operation of intellectual virtue? Specifically, does the operation of intellectual virtue alter the cognitive agent's state of belief? Two points require further clarification: the nature of the belief held by the cognitive subject and the role of intellectual virtue in the formation of that belief. Regarding the first point, the nature of the belief held by the subject can be interpreted in at least two distinct ways:

> (i) The epistemic agent believes in proposition P rather than Q, R, S, etc., because of the operation of his or her intellectual virtues. For example, Smith believes the proposition [Pandas live in China] rather than [Pandas live in the United States or the United Kingdom] because of the functioning of his intellectual virtues.
>
> (ii) The epistemic agent believes that proposition P is true rather than false because of the exercise of his or her intellectual virtues. For instance, Smith believes that [Pandas live in China] is true rather than false because of the influence of his intellectual virtues.

The first explanation (i) provides an account of the *content* of the agent's belief—why Smith holds this belief rather than other beliefs. In this interpretation, the subject holds certain beliefs instead of others because of the influence of

intellectual virtues. For example, the subject believes proposition P [Pandas live in China] rather than proposition Q [Pandas live in the United States] because intellectual virtues have engaged in investigation, questioning, and evidence assessment during the belief-formation process and because the agent believes that proposition P rather than proposition Q, R, or S is itself a result of the operation of intellectual virtues. However, the truth of proposition P arises from the fact or state of affairs—that pandas indeed live in China—which does not depend on the cognitive subject's intellectual virtue. Therefore, in this case, intellectual virtues neither determine nor guarantee the truth of the belief; rather, they shape the agent's belief-formation process, making it more cognitively reliable and comprehensive. Here, the expression "because" signifies that intellectual virtue can guide the subject to believe and hold certain beliefs rather than suggesting that intellectual virtues make those beliefs true.

The second explanation (ii) provides an account of the source of the belief's *truth*—why Smith believes proposition P to be true rather than false. In this context, intellectual virtue makes a direct contribution to the truth of the belief. For instance, Smith believes that proposition P [Pandas live in China] is true rather than false owing to the influence of his intellectual virtues. This finding indicates that intellectual virtues actively guide epistemic agents in discerning truth from falsehood, enabling them to navigate challenging cognitive environments and ultimately obtain truth. That is, the subject makes a correct judgment about the truth of the proposition P [Pandas live in China] because of the role of intellectual virtues. Here, the word "because" implies a strong causal relationship between intellectual virtues and the truth of the proposition, suggesting that intellectual virtues are the primary reason the cognitive agent ultimately attains truth. In other words, this explanation assumes that the truth of the belief is *partially or wholly* attributable to the role of intellectual virtues.

Which of the two explanations does Zagzebski intend to convey? It appears that she leans toward explanation (ii), where intellectual virtues play a direct causal role in guiding the agent to a correct judgment about the *truth* of the belief. She contends that the crux of the Gettier problem lies in the inability of justification to guarantee truth. She attempts to approach truth through the operation of intellectual virtues, which implies that she attributes truth to the functioning of the epistemic agent's intellectual virtues. Thus, is truth partially or wholly attributable to the exercise of intellectual virtues? This raises the question of the role that intellectual virtues play in the process of belief formation. According to Zagzebski's definition of knowledge—as a state of belief (rather than a state of true belief) arising out of acts of intellectual virtue—she appears to assert a stronger claim: the truth of a proposition can be fully attributed to the workings of intellectual virtues. According to her definition of knowledge, the truth of belief is entirely grounded in the acts of intellectual virtues. However, an individual's intellectual virtues, such as intellectual caution, attentiveness, and open-mindedness, seem to offer a compelling explanation (albeit partial rather than full) for why an agent is

more likely to hold some beliefs rather than others, as suggested by interpretation (i)—the content of belief. In most cases, the factors that lead the subject to acquire truth are multifaceted. In other words, intellectual virtues are truth conducive, but they do not guarantee it. If truth can be explained through intellectual virtues, then it should be partially, rather than entirely, attributable to the role of intellectual virtues.

Therefore, a more reasonable position is that the operation of intellectual virtues provides a sound and relevant account for the content of belief (explanation (i)) rather than serving as the source of the truth of belief (explanation (ii)). The functions of intellectual virtues are more likely to lead a cognitive agent to believe certain propositions, such as proposition P (the content of the belief), rather than others, such as Q, R, or S. We would expect a virtuous and a nonvirtuous person to have very different patterns of thought, reflected in the content of their beliefs. Regarding explanation (ii), what remains unclear is how the operation of intellectual virtues enables the agent to attain the truth of propositions such as [Pandas live in China] or [Two plus two equals four]. In other words, the nature of the relationship—if any—between the cognitive agent's intellectual virtues and truth remains ambiguous. Therefore, compared with the interpretation (ii) that Zagzebski aims to pursue—where the operation of intellectual virtues explains the truth of beliefs—interpretation (i) seems to be a more reasonable explanation, as it regards the operation of intellectual virtues as a good and relevant explanation for the content of beliefs. However, if it is true that intellectual virtue is a reasonable explanation in terms of the content of the agent's beliefs, Zagzebski's approach does not bridge the gap or disconnect between proof and truth. Because intellectual virtues do not guarantee truth, the source of truth lies elsewhere. That is, in Zagzebski's definition of knowledge (Def3: knowledge is a state of belief arising from acts of intellectual virtue), explaining how acts of intellectual virtue lead to truth remains challenging. Thus, the operation or actions of intellectual virtues cannot provide a sufficient account of the truth of propositions and knowledge.

4.3. Is Intellectual Virtue a Necessary Condition for Knowledge?

As previously mentioned, to address the disconnection between justification and truth, Zagzebski attempts to guarantee the truth of propositions through intellectual virtues, which makes intellectual virtues *a necessary condition* for knowledge. However, is intellectual virtue truly a necessary condition for someone to know something? In other words, cannot knowledge be attained without the presence of intellectual virtue?

In fact, numerous examples of knowledge demonstrate that its acquisition does not necessarily depend on the exercise of intellectual virtues. Most of the time, "knowledge and justification often are acquired in a more or less passive way, namely, in a way that makes few if any demands on the character of the

cognitive agent in question" (Baehr 2019). For example, knowledge by perception is immediately and automatically apprehended by sensory organs, with no evidence to suggest that it is consciously mediated by intellectual virtues. Consider the scenario where the light in the room suddenly goes out, and the epistemic agent immediately knows this fact and forms the belief: [The lighting has changed]. In acquiring this knowledge, there is no indication that the agent has exercised intellectual virtues, nor is there any evidence suggesting that the truth of the belief was brought about by a conscious, virtue-guided action (acts of intellectual virtue). Instead, this belief arises primarily from, if not entirely, the routine functioning of visual faculties. According to Zagzebski's analysis, the belief in this case that [the lighting has changed] does not satisfy the requirements of knowledge, as it was not acquired through or by virtue of the intellectual virtues of the subject. However, we cannot deny that, in this case, the epistemic agent certainly knows that the lighting in the room has changed unless one adopts an extremely skeptical position. That is, the subject possesses knowledge, but this knowledge does not arise from any intellectual virtues. Moreover, individuals who perform intellectual deficiencies—such as intellectual dogmatists, closed-minded thinkers, or those who are intellectually apathetic—are not precluded from acquiring knowledge. This is sufficient to demonstrate that knowledge can be obtained without the presence of intellectual virtue. Given this and the related possibilities, the exercise of intellectual virtues cannot serve as a necessary condition for knowledge or justification. Moreover, it is unlikely to be a sufficient condition for knowledge, as there is no conclusive evidence of a necessary connection between intellectual virtues and truth.

The core argument of virtue epistemology (including virtue responsibilism) is that virtues, specifically intellectual virtues, occupy a foundational and significant place in epistemology. However, given the existence of the aforementioned types of sensory knowledge, once virtue epistemologists take a step back and acknowledge that intellectual virtue should not play a central role in the analysis of knowledge or justification, their claim regarding the epistemic importance of intellectual virtues becomes difficult to defend. This situation leaves virtue epistemology in a dilemma. To defend the importance of intellectual virtues for epistemological inquiry, virtue epistemologists must demonstrate "there is a unified set of substantive philosophical issues and questions to be pursued in connection with the intellectual virtues and their role in the intellectual life" (Baehr 2019). Without such issues, the philosophical significance of intellectual virtue and the validity of virtue responsibilism itself could be called into question. Furthermore, as Baehr stated, "If these issues and questions are to form the basis of an alternative approach to epistemology, they must be the proper subject matter of epistemology itself, rather than of ethics or some other related discipline" (Baehr 2019). Thus, while Zagzebski's positioning of knowledge within the framework of ethics introduces an interdisciplinary perspective into epistemology, it also raises concerns about the relevance of intellectual virtues to

epistemological issues. Thus, it is doubtful that intellectual virtue is a necessary condition for knowledge.

4.4 The Complexity of the Concept of Knowledge

While Zagzebski's analysis of knowledge performs well in some Gettier cases, there remains significant doubt as to whether her account of knowledge can adequately cover all instances of knowledge. In philosophical discourse, when we discuss the concept of knowledge, we typically refer to propositional knowledge or knowledge-that (knowing-that). However, there are many other types of knowledge, such as knowledge-how (knowing-how), which refers to skill-based knowledge that one possesses "when one can be truly described as knowing how to do something: play the piano, make a pie, walk, speak, create, build, and so on" (Pavese 2021). Knowledge by acquaintance is a form of knowledge that we are "directly aware without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths" (Russell 1912, 78). Knowledge by perception is one of the typical examples of this. Knowledge by description is a form of knowledge that "to know some thing or object by a definite description, i.e., that there is exactly one object that is so-and-so" (Russell 1912, 78). There is also knowledge gained through testimony (knowledge by testimony), such as the knowledge we acquire from the testimony of experts, newspapers, television, and even books in our daily life. Although there is significant debate about whether testimony is a reliable source of knowledge, assuming it is, this indicates an individual's cognitive dependence on others in the process of acquiring knowledge. In other words, the cognitive environment is complex and dynamic, and acquiring knowledge requires cooperation with others. Attempting to navigate this complex environment that relies entirely on one's own abilities (such as intellectual virtues) to do so is unrealistic.

Moreover, there is much knowledge that is beyond our control. As Bell noted, much of the knowledge we possess we acquired passively, such as knowledge about the past, viz., history knowledge. The acquisition of those types of knowledge does not imply that if an individual is motivated by intellectually virtuous motives and engages in intellectually virtuous actions, they will necessarily arrive at the truth through these actions. In other words, there seems to be no reliable causal connection between past facts and intellectual virtues; it is unclear how the exercise of intellectual virtues can guarantee the truth of past events. Thus, how can we discern the truth or falsity of beliefs about the past and future through intellectual virtue? The above different types of knowledge possess distinct characteristics, indicating that attempting to encompass all forms of knowledge within a single definition is an insurmountable task.

In fact, it is impossible to set boundaries for knowledge within one fixed definition, as there is no single essence, such as intellectual virtue, that captures all cases of knowledge. If the nature of knowledge is understood as a relationship

between the subject (the knower) and the object (the facts known) or between the internal and the external worlds, then, in Kant's words, knowledge becomes a synthesis of sensory experience and conceptual frameworks, meaning any definition of knowledge must account for the complex interaction between subjectivity and objectivity. This makes providing a concise definition of knowledge exceptionally difficult, if not impossible.

5. Conclusion

Gettier cases follow a characteristic recipe: they begin with a belief that is well-justified, thereby meeting the justification condition for knowledge. A factor of bad luck prevents the justified belief from being true. Finally, an element of "good luck" counteracts the bad luck, resulting in the belief's ultimate truth. Epistemologists argue that the subject in such cases does not, in fact, possess knowledge. Zagzebski maintains that the fundamental obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge arises from the way in which double luck disrupts the connection between justification and truth. Her proposed solution is to reconstruct a stable and reliable link between the two by grounding it in the intellectual virtues of the knower. On this account, if a justified true belief is generated through the exercise of intellectual virtues, the motivational orientation, virtuous conduct, and reliable success of those virtues collectively establish a stable relation to truth, thereby securing knowledge. However, this solution is less convincing than it initially appears. By defining the motivation underlying all intellectual virtues as inherently truth-directed, Zagzebski effectively presupposes the very connection she seeks to establish. Intellectual virtue thus becomes not a means of *linking* justification and truth but rather a *source* of truth itself. Thus, the relation to truth is reduced to a stipulative condition internal to the subject, rather than an epistemically significant relation to an independent reality. This move risks collapsing the justification structure into a form of internalism that leaves the external dimension of knowledge underexplained. Consequently, the central problem remains unresolved: Zagzebski's framework does not demonstrate *how* intellectual virtue genuinely secures a connection between justification and truth, nor does it adequately account for the epistemic bridge between the internal and external domains. Intellectual virtue, on closer inspection, guarantees only internal coherence, not a substantive linkage to truth itself.

Furthermore, Zagzebski adheres to the metaphysical presupposition of a mind-things dualism. This dualistic framework assumes that things exist independently and they can only be apprehended indirectly, as mental representations—images, ideas, or propositions—constructed within the mind. This representationalist paradigm takes shape the dominant conception of knowledge, which presupposes a fundamental separation between the epistemic subject and the objects that their "beliefs" or "ideas" purport to represent. Knowledge is

thereby construed as a relation between two ontologically distinct entities: the knower and the known. Zagzebski's epistemology is firmly situated within this context. She introduces the concept of intellectual virtue into the analysis of knowledge, arguing that to know is to believe the truth *because of* one's intellectual virtues, thereby placing responsibility for the attainment of knowledge squarely on the epistemic subject. This shift significantly enhances the subjectivity of the knower and marks an important departure from traditional epistemic passivism. Nevertheless, it is difficult to overlook the fact that, Zagzebski's definition of knowledge—along with her proposed solution to the Gettier problem—remains subject to the inherent limitations of representational epistemology. That is to say, under the framework of a mind-things dualism, the attempt to secure a stable link to truth by "representing" the external reality through the faculties of the mind (intellectual virtue) is, if not impossible, at least profoundly problematic. Such an approach leaves unresolved the fundamental question of *how* intellectual virtue can genuinely mediate the relation between the knowing subject and an independent reality.

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Equipping Evangelizers in the Digital Age: Bridging Competency Gaps of Parish Social Communicators in the Diocese of Malolos

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Franz-Josef Eilers' seven-competency framework, this explanatory sequential logic study adopted a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design to identify formation gaps among 734 parish social-communication volunteers in the Diocese of Malolos, Bulacan, Philippines. Survey data indicate strong ethical and professional confidence, but lower self-ratings in theological literacy and back-end digital analytics. Three focus-group discussions (n = 32) explain these patterns, unveiling (1) a "craft–content–connection" synergy model, (2) a front-end/back-end skills divide, (3) an anxiety-driven strategy of comment-thread closure during online controversy, and (4) volunteers' perception of training as both pastoral empowerment and career capital. Synthesizing quantitative and qualitative strands, the article proposes an integrated "SOCCOM Academy" that braids theology, analytics, crisis drills, and creative labs. The findings extend Eilers' competence paradigm and supply empirical grounding for an Asian diocesan pastoral-communication plan.

Keywords: *Catholic social communication; training-needs assessment; Eilers competency framework; Diocese of Malolos; parish media ministry*

1. Background of the Study

When the Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council or Vatican II in 1962 to "revitalize the Christian faith in an increasingly secularized world" (Vatican News 2022), the second document it promulgated was *Inter Mirifica* or the Decree on the Media of Social Communication. *Inter Mirifica* primarily emphasizes the importance of using the various modern means of communication responsibly, for the common good, and for the apostolic ministry of the Church (Vatican II on Social Communication n.d.).

The decree defined social communication to include all forms and ways of communicating in human society, from traditional forms like storytelling, rumor, drama, dance, and music to the Internet and cyberspace (Eilers 2002). It also mandated that priests, religious, and laity be trained immediately to acquire the competence needed to use the different means of social communication for the apostolate.

The subsequent pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio,* issued almost ten years after *Inter Mirifica*, and is considered the '*magna carta*' of Catholic communication, re-emphasized the need for training the communicators of the Church:

> Many are the communicators who handle well the tools of their profession, but lack a deep understanding of the art of communicating with all it implies. It is obvious that the communicators in the media who wish to excel need a serious and specialized training in every aspect of their work. The growing trend to found faculties of social communication in institutions of higher learning, and these with authority to confer degrees, is a welcome development. For if communicators are to meet their professional obligations, they must have sound knowledge as well as experience. (*Communio et Progressio*, #71)

Marking the document's 20th anniversary, *Aetatis Novae* (1992) required every episcopal conference and diocese to draft an integrated pastoral communication plan, produced in consultation with Catholic media organizations and linked to wider pastoral strategies in education, social service, and evangelization. Its appendix begins with a research phase—needs assessment, information gathering, and model exploration—specifically recommending needs assessments to pinpoint areas of the social communications ministry that demand focused attention.

1.1. Formation Programs for Social Communicators in the Diocese of Malolos

Social communication in the Diocese of Malolos is overseen by a priest-led Diocesan Commission, supported by vicariate priest-representatives and lay volunteers. Since 2021, the Commission has implemented a year-long formation cycle: FOCUS (Formation and Orientation towards a Catholic Understanding of Social Communications), VISIT (Vicarial Integration, Sharing of Insights and

Thoughts), PROCLAIM (Proclaiming the Charisms, Life, Achievements, and Inspirations in the Ministry), DEEPEN (Desiring, Encountering, and Entrusting God's Presence in Evangelization), and SHARPEN (Skills Harnessing for Pastoral Ministry and Evangelization).

These were conceptualized by the Commission in consultation with diocesan clergy and experienced lay practitioners, and delivered by a mix of priest-mentors and invited media professionals. Evaluations are conducted at the close of each activity, with recommendations noted for implementation in the next cycle. While the five-part cycle has been repeated annually since its launch, the design largely follows a "one-size-fits-all" approach: orientation, dialogue, celebration, spirituality, and skills workshops recur in the same sequence, without significant scaffolding for volunteers who have already completed previous cycles. As a result, the cycle provides valuable exposure and fellowship but lacks a structured progression pathway that develops beginner, intermediate, and advanced competencies over time. This gap strengthens the argument for an integrated pastoral plan—one that moves beyond event-based sessions toward a systematic curriculum where volunteers can build on prior learning and grow in responsibility and expertise within the ministry.

In consonance with the mandate of the pastoral instruction *Aetatis Novae,* there is a need to develop an integrated pastoral plan for social communications that is based on research, which may include training needs assessment, communication audit, and resource inventory. Having such a plan that is rooted in research will ensure that it is relevant, responsive, and tailored to the local situation in the Diocese of Malolos.

Moreover, the communication landscape today presents challenges unforeseen by Vatican II. Digital evangelization now unfolds in a climate marked by infodemics, hypersensitivity, atypical media cycles, and misinformation (Navas 2022). Social media has likewise become not merely a support but a permanent pastoral environment (Le Duc 2022), while pandemic-driven experiences revealed both creativity and vulnerability in Asian churches' digital outreach (*Church Communication in the New Normal* 2022). In the Philippines, Tenedero's (2025) Figured World study highlights how a parish Facebook page functions as a discursive space for negotiating faith and community identity.

In this context, the Diocese of Malolos' social-communication ministry is largely youth-led: nearly half of the volunteers are below 20 years old, and almost half have less than one year of ministry experience. While this youthful profile suggests energy and creativity, it also highlights barriers to fulfilling the Church's mandate for trained communicators—limited theological grounding, uneven digital literacy, and short ministerial tenure. Moreover, access to reliable internet, digital subscriptions, and back-end analytics tools varies across parishes, reflecting disparities shaped by location and resources. These demographic and infrastructural realities underscore why a systematic training-needs assessment is necessary:

competence in social communication cannot be presumed, but must be supported by research-based formation tailored to local conditions.

1.2. Training Needs Assessment for Communicators

Effective communication is not merely message transmission but "the process of being understood," where what the receiver grasps matches the sender's intent (Arnold and McClure 2023). Training-needs assessment pinpoints the knowledge or skill gaps that hinder this match, enabling organizations to design targeted programs for optimal performance (Kaufman and English 1979; Gupta 2011).

In communication work, those gaps appear when practitioners fall short of established standards—rules that govern what, when, and how to convey messages across media. By measuring current ability against required competence, a communication needs assessment reveals discrepancies; training then focuses on closing them, ensuring practitioners meet standards and their messages are understood exactly as intended.

2. Literature Review

Building on the digital-age challenges outlined earlier, the next step is to review training needs assessment (TNA) literature, which offers structured approaches that can be adapted to parish social-communication contexts. Literature on TNA provides a structured framework that could be applied to assess the capacities of Church communicators. Kura and Kaur (2021) compile common TNA methods such as task analysis, competency-based assessment, and strategic gap analysis. They emphasize that an enabling learning environment is vital to enhance organizational performance and credibility.

Sector-specific studies demonstrate the breadth of TNA applications. Education studies in the Philippines, Greece, Nigeria, Sudan, and Iran consistently reveal gaps between mandated curricula and teachers' self-rated skills (Liwanag, Padohinog, and Balsicas 2023; Pavlou, Anagnou, and Fragkoulis 2021; Ogba, Ugodulunwa, and Igu 2020; Yousif, Ahmed, and Osman 2019; Koohi et al. 2016). Health-care audits—from Ethiopian laboratories to Malawi's paediatric ICUs and U.S. military clinics—flag shortages in digital analytics and crisis response (Gebregzabher et al. 2023; Renning et al. 2022; Lennon et al. 2023), findings echoed in Europe-wide reviews (Czabanowska and Feria 2024; Lanza et al. 2023). Service and corporate TNAs underline mismatches between managers and frontline staff on communication skills (Streuli et al. 2024a; Hyasat, Al-Weshah, and Kakeesh 2022; Hawkins, Ehsan, and Burkitt 2023; Gyeltshen et al. 2021; Cigularov and Dillulio 2020), while public-sector reports—from Canada's food regulators to the U.S. National Park Service and Saskatchewan's urban

workforce—stress stakeholder-driven diagnostics (Streuli et al. 2024b; Powell, Depper, and Wright 2017; Saskatchewan Institute 2003). Government toolkits such as *South African Management Development Institute (SAMDI) Training Manual* (2007) further codify process norms.

Despite abundant TNA research in secular fields, virtually none targets Catholic social-communication ministers, leaving the Church without evidence-based training tools tailored to their needs. Empirical, locally grounded studies using structured assessments are therefore essential to shape formation in today's fast-evolving media landscape.

3. Statement of the Problem and Objectives

Given the persistent digital-age challenges facing parish social communication ministries, and the limited research documenting the competencies and formation needs of volunteers at the parish level, this study sought to examine these realities in the Diocese of Malolos.

This study aimed to answer the following research question: *How do parish social communication volunteers in the Diocese of Malolos perceive their competencies, formation gaps, and training needs for digital evangelization?*

The following are the objectives of this study:

- To assess the self-perceived competency levels of parish social communication volunteers using Eilers' seven-competency framework (technical, critical, creative, ethical, cultural, theological, and professional).
- To identify formation gaps and training needs that hinder volunteers in carrying out their parish communication work effectively.
- To analyze how volunteers experience and navigate these gaps in practice, with attention to the interplay of craft, content, and connection in their ministry.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the seven communication competencies proposed by Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers (2014), which collectively form a holistic model for the formation of Catholic social communicators. Eilers emphasizes that social communication training should go beyond technical or media skills and instead foster well-rounded communicators who are spiritually grounded, critically aware, and professionally competent. His framework encourages individuals to become responsible communicators—capable of making ethical and contextually appropriate decisions in their use of media and communication tools.

The central concept in this framework is communication competence, which is understood across seven dimensions:

- Technical Competence – skills in operating digital tools and media platforms;
- Critical Competence – the ability to analyze and assess media content and its impact;
- Creative Competence – capacity for innovation in content creation and storytelling;
- Ethical Competence – sensitivity to moral, doctrinal, and Church values in communication;
- Cultural Competence – respect and awareness for diverse cultural contexts in messaging;
- Theological Competence – grounding in the Church's teachings, mission, and prayer life;
- Professional Competence – adherence to standards of teamwork, research, and lifelong learning.

This study applied Eilers' framework to assess the current levels of competence among social communication volunteers in the Diocese of Malolos and to identify training needs that would support their ministry more effectively. The framework assumes that gaps in any of the seven areas indicate specific needs for capacity building.

In this study, each of Eilers' seven competencies was translated into concrete indicators that reflect the skills and attitudes parish social communicators are expected to demonstrate. Technical competence was measured through abilities such as using livestream equipment, operating cameras, editing photos and videos, and managing parish social media pages. Critical competence involved assessing the credibility of sources, recognizing misinformation, and evaluating the impact of online content. Creative competence included skills in layout and design, writing captions and scripts, and producing original media for evangelization. Ethical competence focused on following Church and copyright guidelines, ensuring respectful communication, and exercising responsibility in digital spaces. Cultural competence was gauged through sensitivity to language, inclusivity, and the capacity to adapt messages for different parish and community contexts. Theological competence included familiarity with the Bible, Catholic teachings, papal messages, and the liturgical calendar as applied in communication work. Finally, professional competence encompassed collaboration within parish teams, coordination with clergy, fulfilling assigned roles, and pursuing ongoing training. These operationalized indicators became the benchmarks for analyzing volunteers' self-assessed competencies and identifying priority gaps in formation.

5. Methodology

Following Creswell's (2014) explanatory sequential logic, the study adopted a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design. A researcher-made, self-administered Google Forms survey—framed by Eilers' (2014) seven competencies—was distributed through purposive sampling to 734 active social communication volunteers drawn from the 118 parishes of the Diocese of Malolos. Because no official registry of parish volunteers exists, the population size was unknown; hence, the strategy was to invite all parishes to nominate their active SOCCOM volunteers, resulting in the achieved sample. This ensured that respondents were directly engaged in parish media work. The instrument underwent expert validation by a priest to help establish content validity and was pilot tested with 20 parish volunteers, resulting in minor revisions for clarity. To deepen and contextualize the survey trends, three follow-up focus-group discussions (FGDs) were held with 32 survey volunteers. Participants for each FGD were first purposively selected for role diversity, then augmented through snowball referrals to capture additional voices within each district and vicariate.

Quantitative data were processed with descriptive statistics, means, frequencies, and percentages, yielding a competence profile across technical, critical, creative, ethical, cultural, theological, and professional domains. Qualitative data from the FGDs were transcribed verbatim and coded solely by the researcher, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. Codes were generated inductively, refined into categories, and clustered into themes through iterative review. Since no additional coders were involved, inter-coder reliability was not computed; instead, consistency was ensured through an audit trail, transcript rechecking, and triangulation with survey results.

The research protocol was not subject to formal ethics board review but adhered to standard ethical practices in communication research (all participants gave written informed consent, were assured of anonymity, and retained the right to withdraw). Data were stored securely and reported in aggregate form. As a member of the diocesan communications commission, the researcher enjoyed insider access yet maintained reflexivity through journaling and anonymization practices to avoid bias.

6. Results

The presentation of results follows the study's three objectives to ensure coherence between the research aims and findings. First, the competency levels of parish social communicators are examined across Eilers' seven key areas of pastoral communication. Second, training needs and gaps are identified, highlighting skills that require further capacity-building for more effective parish

communication work. Finally, the communication challenges and formation experiences of parish volunteers are explored through thematic analysis, providing deeper insight into the realities and opportunities of pastoral media ministry.

6.1. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

A total of 734 respondents participated in the Training Needs Analysis survey for Catholic social communicators in the Diocese of Malolos. The demographic profile reflects a dynamic, youth-led ministry grounded in diverse experiences and educational backgrounds across the ecclesiastical territory.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	377	51.4%
	Male	357	48.6%
Age	Under 20	362	49.3%
	21–30	296	40.3%
	31–40	52	7.1%
	41–50	17	2.3%
	51–60	5	0.7%
	60+	2	0.3%
Education	Undergraduate degree	337	45.9%
	High school graduate	247	33.7%
	Graduate degree	118	16.1%
	Doctorate	30	4.1%
	Others (vocational, technical training)	2	0.3%
Years in Ministry	< 1 year	349	47.6%
	1–3 years	185	25.2%
	4–6 years	156	21.3%
	7+ years	44	6.0%
District	Western	220	30.0%
	Northern	195	26.6%
	Eastern	195	26.6%

Variable	Category	n	%
	Southern	124	16.9%
Role in Ministry	General member	250	34.1%
	Photographer/Videographer	108	14.7%
	Finance/Admin	94	12.8%
	Livestream/AV Operator	87	11.9%
	Leadership	78	10.6%
	Other (e.g. graphic design, parish website maintenance, radio program coordination, parish bulletin layout editing)	73	9.9%
	Layout/Design	41	5.6%
	No Answer	3	0.4%

The table above presents the demographic profile of respondents. The ministry is strikingly youthful, with 49% under 20 years old. In terms of experience, nearly half have less than one year in service, compared with only 6% with more than seven years. District distribution is fairly balanced, but the Southern District had the lowest participation (17%). Functionally, plurality serves as general members (34%), while layout/design roles are the least common (6%). These extremes suggest a dynamic yet inexperienced volunteer base, reinforcing the need for structured mentoring and capacity-building.

6.2. Competency Levels Based on Eilers' Seven Key Areas: Self-Assessment of Communication Competencies

This section presents the results of the self-assessment portion of the survey anchored on the seven competencies for Church communicators as proposed by Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers: technical, critical, creative, ethical, cultural, theological, and professional. Each competency was assessed through targeted statements designed to measure the respondents' perceived knowledge, skills, and practices. The survey included 24 items classified under these seven domains, allowing for an evaluation of strengths and gaps in communication competence among ministry workers.

The 4-point Likert scale responses (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree) were analyzed using the weighted mean. To aid interpretation, the resulting scores were categorized into descriptive ranges: 3.26–4.00 (High), 2.51–3.25 (Moderate), 1.76–2.50 (Low), and 1.00–1.75 (Very Low). A higher mean score

indicates stronger agreement and greater confidence in the competency, while lower scores reflect weaker agreement and highlight areas of formation gaps or training needs. This interpretive scale provides a clearer understanding of how parish social communication volunteers perceive their competencies across the seven domains.

6.2.1. Technical competence

The mean scores for items under technical competence ranged from 3.02 to 3.34, yielding an overall average of 3.19, indicating a generally agreeable level of proficiency among respondents. Church communicators show confidence in using digital tools such as social media platforms and multimedia editing software. However, slightly lower scores were observed in areas requiring analytical skills, particularly in using data analytics to assess communication impact (M = 3.02).

Table 02: Technical competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I can effectively use multimedia (videos, photos, graphics) in my communication efforts.	3.34	High
I have experience in managing online communities (e.g., church social media, forums).	3.25	Moderate
I can analyze the effectiveness of different types of media used in communication.	3.24	Moderate
I am proficient in using digital tools such as social media platforms, video editing software, and audio tools.	3.22	Moderate
I am confident in my ability to use basic web design tools for creating engaging content.	3.13	Moderate
I can produce and edit video content for social media platforms.	3.13	Moderate
I am proficient in using data analytics to assess the reach and impact of my communication efforts.	3.02	Moderate

6.2.2. Critical competence

With a mean score of 3.20, respondents showed a healthy level of agreement regarding their ability to critically assess content and context in communication. This reflects a foundational strength in discernment and judgment—critical traits

in Church communication, where messages often intersect with doctrinal, pastoral, and societal concerns.

Table 03: Critical competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I am able to think critically about the content and context of my communication, making sound judgments.	3.2	High

6.2.3. Creative competence

Respondents rated themselves positively on creative competence, with a mean score of 3.31. They agreed that they regularly use innovative strategies to engage audiences and navigate communication challenges. This suggests a growing adaptability among Church communicators to appeal to evolving audience preferences, particularly in digital environments.

Table 4: Creative competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I make sure that my communications respect the dignity of all people involved.	3.44	High
I am aware of the ethical challenges faced in my communication work and strive to address them.	3.32	High
I am familiar with the ethical guidelines for online and digital communication.	3.30	High
I regularly reflect on the ethical implications of my communication.	3.26	High
I regularly consider ethical implications when creating multimedia content.	3.24	Moderate

6.2.4. Ethical competence

Scoring the highest among all competencies at 3.31, ethical competence emerged as a well-developed area among respondents. Church communicators demonstrated consistent awareness of ethical considerations, including digital guidelines, respect for dignity, and the moral implications of multimedia content. This strong ethical grounding is vital, particularly in light of the Church's role as a moral compass in public discourse. The findings affirm that respondents are

mindful of their responsibilities when communicating sensitive or faith-based messages.

Table 5: Ethical competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I make sure that my communications respect the dignity of all people involved.	3.44	High
I am aware of the ethical challenges faced in my communication work and strive to address them.	3.32	High
I am familiar with the ethical guidelines for online and digital communication.	3.30	High
I regularly reflect on the ethical implications of my communication.	3.26	High
I regularly consider ethical implications when creating multimedia content.	3.24	Moderate

6.2.6. Cultural competence

With a competence mean of 3.24, cultural sensitivity appears to be a priority for Church communicators. Respondents affirmed their ability to adapt messages to diverse audiences and cultural settings, and to respect religious and cultural nuances in media. The data suggests a commendable level of intercultural awareness, crucial for an inclusive and dialogical communication approach in the multicultural contexts often encountered in Church ministries.

Table 6: Cultural competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I ensure that all media used respects the cultural and religious sensitivities of the audience.	3.39	High
I am able to adapt my communication style to different audiences or contexts.	3.31	High
I feel confident in creating and presenting messages that are culturally sensitive.	3.16	Moderate
I can create content that resonates with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.	3.12	Moderate

6.2.7. Theological competence

Theological competence received the lowest mean score at 3.13, pointing to a relatively modest self-assessment of the ability to integrate theological grounding into communication work. While respondents recognize the importance of this area, their lower confidence levels suggest a potential gap in theological literacy or application in real-world contexts.

Table 7: Theological competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I am able to integrate theological principles into my communication efforts.	3.15	Moderate
I can assess the theological grounding of my communication in pastoral and community contexts.	3.10	Moderate

6.2.8. Professional competence

Tied with ethical competence at 3.31, professional competence is a notable strength. Respondents expressed strong agreement in applying communication standards and expressing ideas effectively. These results highlight a professional discipline among Church communicators, which may be attributed to formal training or experience in journalism, media, or organizational communication.

Table 8: Professional competence

Indicator	*Mean*	*Verbal Interpretation*
I apply professional standards to manage and organize communication resources effectively.	3.36	High
I understand and apply professional standards in communication, including the use of proper methods and tools.	3.35	High
I am able to express ideas clearly and persuasively in both written and spoken forms.	3.21	Moderate

Overall, the results indicate that Church communicators view themselves as generally competent across all seven domains proposed by Eilers. The highest-rated areas, ethical and professional competence, point to a strong sense of responsibility and discipline, while relatively lower scores in theological and technical (analytics-focused) domains indicate areas for development. These findings suggest that while Church communicators are adapting well to

contemporary demands, continuous capacity building, particularly in theological grounding and evidence-based media practice, will further strengthen their effectiveness. An integrated training program that reinforces these competencies holistically can equip communicators to respond more faithfully and creatively to the Church's mission in a digital world.

6.3. Training Needs and Gaps in Parish Communication Work: Scenario-Based Evaluation of Competency Application

This section presents the results of the scenario-based evaluation of the survey, which reveals that Catholic social communicators across the Diocese of Malolos exhibit a consistently high level of confidence in applying their communication skills to real-life pastoral and professional contexts.

For this section, a 4-point Likert scale was used to assess competency application in scenario-based situations. The scale was reversed: 1 = highest and 4 = lowest. Interpretation ranges were: 1.00–1.49 (Very High), 1.50–2.49 (High), 2.50–3.49 (Moderate), and 3.50–4.00 (Low). Lower mean scores indicate stronger competency application, while higher scores point to gaps needing further training.

Although none of the mean scores for the six assessed competencies reached the "Very High" benchmark (mean ≤ 1.49 on the reverse Likert scale), all items scored within the "High" range (1.50–2.49). This suggests that practical competence is broadly developed among respondents.

For critical competence (M=1.92), participants showed sound judgment in addressing misinformation but would benefit from real-world case workshops to sharpen responses under pressure. In terms of cultural competence (M=1.95), there is basic awareness of intercultural sensitivity, yet deeper training in inclusive messaging and content review is recommended. Creative competence (M=2.02) showed functional skills in visual storytelling, suggesting a need to cultivate greater creativity through design labs and mentoring. Ethical competence (M=2.21) revealed a thoughtful but tentative approach in handling controversial issues, highlighting the value of role-play and ethical dialogue sessions. For theological competence (M=2.14), respondents showed doctrinal familiarity but need more practice in applying Church teachings spontaneously—this may be addressed through "Theology in Action" modules. Lastly, professional competence (M=1.91) indicated a strong sense of inclusive communication, though still needing reinforcement through training on feedback systems, inclusive language, and parish communication tools.

Table 9: Scenario-based evaluation of competency

Question	*Competence*	*Mean Score*	*Interpretation*
You are tasked with designing a church event flyer. How creatively do you incorporate visual elements to capture attention?	Creative	2.02	High
A colleague shares a message online with false information about a community event. How do you critically assess the situation and respond?	Critical	1.92	High
You are planning a social media post about a new church initiative. How well can you assess the cultural sensitivities of the message for your audience?	Cultural	1.95	High
During a pastoral visit, you are asked about a controversial issue. How confident are you in using ethical guidelines to address the issue?	Ethical	2.21	High
A community member complains that the communication in your church is not clear or inclusive. How confident are you that you can professionally assess and address the feedback?	Professional	1.91	High
You need to give a talk on the importance of community outreach. How well do you connect the message to Church teachings and Scripture?	Theological	2.14	High

Note: 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Highest application to 4 = Lowest application

The scenario-based evaluation affirms the practical readiness of many social communicators while highlighting the need for practical, immersive, and ministry-aligned training approaches. To build on existing strengths, parishes and vicariates may integrate practice-based formation through simulations, real-life scenarios, and regular reflection exercises. Including scenario-based assessments in future evaluations will also ensure that theoretical knowledge is consistently translated into ethical, inclusive, and context-sensitive communication practices.

6.3.1. Technical skills assessment

The survey also assessed the technical skills of the respondents. The assessment of specific technical skills among parish social communicators revealed a

wide range of proficiency levels across commonly used digital tools. Notably, participants demonstrated high comfort in designing visual content using platforms such as Canva and Adobe Photoshop, with a mean score of 3.07. This suggests that visual communication is a strength for many respondents, supporting the growing demand for engaging graphic materials in parish events and catechetical campaigns.

Most of the remaining tools yielded moderate proficiency scores. These include video editing tools (M = 2.41), email marketing platforms (M = 2.29), social media management systems (M = 2.05), presentation software (M = 2.96), analytics platforms (M = 2.59), podcasting tools (M = 2.02), and SEO knowledge (M = 2.54). These results indicate a working familiarity with essential tools, but they also point to opportunities for upskilling.

Two areas stood out with low proficiency: content management systems (CMS) for website maintenance (M = 1.97) and collaboration via project management tools such as Trello or Asana (M = 1.73). These findings highlight critical gaps in long-term content planning and team coordination—functions essential for scaling communication ministries at the parish and diocesan levels. The low scores may reflect limited access to training, underutilization of digital workflows, or lack of integration into regular ministry operations.

Table 10: Technical skills assessment

Technical Skill	*Mean Score*	*Interpretation*
How proficient are you in using content management systems (CMS) (e.g., WordPress, Joomla)?	1.97	Low
How comfortable are you with designing visual content (e.g., Canva, Photoshop)?	3.07	High
How familiar are you with video editing tools (e.g., Premiere Pro, Final Cut)?	2.41	Moderate
How often do you use social media management platforms (e.g., Hootsuite)?	2.05	Moderate
How confident are you in managing email marketing campaigns (e.g., MailChimp)?	2.29	Moderate
How proficient are you in using analytics tools (e.g., Google Analytics, Facebook Insights)?	2.59	Moderate
How skilled are you with presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint, Google Slides)?	2.96	Moderate
How familiar are you with podcasting tools (e.g., Audacity, Anchor)?	2.02	Moderate

How well do you understand the basics of SEO (Search Engine Optimization)?	2.54	Moderate
How often do you collaborate with a team using project management tools (e.g., Trello, Asana)?	1.73	Low

The findings emphasize the need for a structured digital upskilling program. Workshops focused on video editing, analytics, podcasting, and SEO could elevate current competencies, while targeted training in CMS and project management would address the most pressing gaps. Encouraging peer mentoring and resource-sharing at the vicariate level may also foster collaborative growth and long-term capacity building. These efforts are vital in empowering social communicators to meet the evolving digital demands of pastoral communication in a post-pandemic Church context.

6.3.2. Training needs

The training-needs analysis shows that the Diocese of Malolos parish volunteers urgently seek upskilling in several domains, with mean scores of 3.50–4.00 signalling strong motivation to learn. Highest priorities are professional competence (research skills and academic grounding) and technical competence (multimedia production), followed by a clear call to sharpen creative competence in message design and theological competence for clearer articulation of Church teaching.

Competencies rated slightly lower (3.00–3.49), cultural, critical, and ethical, still merit attention through case-based, intercultural, and moral-decision modules. The findings point to modular, hands-on training: university partnerships for research, vicariate-level multimedia workshops, creative storytelling labs, and contextual-theology sessions, collectively closing gaps while sustaining volunteers' evident enthusiasm.

Table 11: Training needs analysis

Training Needs Question	*Competence*	*Mean Score*	*Interpretation*
I could benefit from learning more about recent academic or Church-related research in social communication.	Professional	3.52	Very High
I believe the Church would benefit from investing more in communication research and academic programs.	Professional	3.51	Very High

I would like to deepen my understanding of how to communicate the teachings of the Church more effectively.	Theological	3.51	Very High
I am interested in developing my ability to express my message in more creative and engaging ways.	Creative	3.5	Very High
I need more training to strengthen my academic foundation in communication theory, media studies, or related disciplines.	Professional	3.5	Very High
I need more training in using multimedia tools effectively for church communication.	Technical	3.5	Very High
I would appreciate more resources on how to engage with different cultures respectfully through communication.	Cultural	3.49	High
I am interested in contributing to research on Church communication if given the opportunity and support.	Professional	3.49	High
I would benefit from practical exercises in critical thinking and evaluating communication messages.	Critical	3.48	High
I would benefit from workshops on ethical issues in digital communication (e.g., privacy, misinformation).	Ethical	3.48	High
I need guidance on how to apply professional communication standards in the context of pastoral work.	Professional	3.46	High
I need more support and encouragement from my institution to engage in professional research in Church or social communication.	Professional	3.45	High

These findings show a strong commitment among communicators to grow in their ministry. Prioritizing immediate training in theology, media tools, and research, alongside structured ongoing formation, will ensure a more professional, ethical, and effective communication ministry across the diocese.

6.4. Communication Challenges and Formation Experiences

The survey of 734 parish volunteers supplied a broad statistical profile of the Diocese of Malolos' social-communication ministry, revealing (a) high self-

ratings in ethical and professional competence, (b) conspicuously lower confidence in theological and analytics-related skills, and (c) pronounced training demand in the same weak areas. To probe the "why" behind these numerical patterns and to surface context-specific solutions, a qualitative follow-up was undertaken.

Three district-level focus-group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 32 survey respondents who met the same inclusion criteria of active ministry service. Each session, lasting 90–110 minutes, was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic approach.

Analysis began with repeated readings of transcripts to capture participants' experiences with digital tools, parish structures, and formation activities. Open coding generated 68 initial codes, reflecting patterns such as "technical struggles," "gaps in theological grounding," and "creative workarounds." These were clustered into 17 conceptual categories and reviewed across the dataset to ensure they represented both commonalities and contrasts across parishes. Categories were then refined into six clearly defined themes that highlighted volunteers' competencies and formation gaps in relation to the study's objectives.

The six themes, distilled through this iterative process, both confirm and nuance the survey results: they affirm volunteers' strengths in visual and ethical work, reveal deeper theological and infrastructural challenges, and articulate concrete training preferences. The next section presents and discusses these themes in detail.

6.4.1. Competence as a dynamic synergy of craft, content, and connection

Across all districts, volunteers defined competence as a triangle of technical craft (eye-catching visuals and livestream skills), doctrinally faithful content (theologically sound, pastorally tuned messaging), and relational connection (collaborative ties with teammates and clergy). The model mirrors survey results: ethical-professional scores top the scale (connection), technical–creative sit in the middle, and theological competence, the "content" corner, remains the weakest point.

Participants stressed that neglecting any side of the triangle hollows out communication. Slick graphics without doctrine, they warned, mimic "aesthetic-first influencers who rarely catechize;" true credibility arises only when polished media, accurate teaching, and ecclesial collaboration converge.

> "When I compare our parish's posts with others, I see we can keep pace—especially in layout—but it lands differently when you know the feast-day color is correct and the parish priest has approved it."

> "As SOCCOM head I can't rely only on my own skill; I make it a point to listen to the team's ideas and the priest's guidance. That's where real collaboration happens—because craft, content, and relationship make the formula."

The model works as a checks-and-balances triangle craft draws attention but is tempered by doctrine, doctrine gains clarity through relational feedback, and connection is sustained by mutual respect—yet if any vertex, especially theology, weakens, the whole structure tilts and teams resort to delays or templated posts.

6.4.2. Visual production and live-streaming as an accessible, but surface-heavy, centre of excellence

Participants consistently portrayed visual production and live-streaming as the ministry's most mature competence, a claim that dovetails with the survey's technical ($\bar{M} = 3.19$) and creative ($\bar{M} = 3.24$) means and the scenario-based creative score of 2.02 ("High"). Thematic analysis, however, shows that this strength is largely front-end and pandemic-driven: volunteers mastered cameras, overlays, and layout software because weekly online Masses became a non-negotiable pastoral service during lockdowns. Skill acquisition was therefore experiential ("we learned on the fly"), peer-mentored, and tightly focused on visual delivery rather than strategic management or evaluation.

> "We're confident the Sunday livestream will always happen—because without it, we can't reach seniors and the bedridden."
>
> "During the pandemic, I had only a desktop; now I can set up multi-camera, overlays, and audio—as long as the parish provides internet and power."

This competence cluster rests on three traits: parish teams favor free, accessible tools like Canva and OBS, explaining their high design scores but low ratings for costlier CMS and project-management apps; skills spread peer-to-peer, producing rapid uptake yet patchy depth across vicariates; and performance is judged by visible output, "Did the stream start on time?", not by back-end metrics.

While this equipment-light model secures a reliable digital presence and meets parishioner expectations for online worship, the lack of analytic literacy blocks data-driven improvement; livestreams air, are archived, and rarely reviewed, leaving the ministry technically competent but strategically shallow.

6.4.3. Theological competence as the ministry's structural Achilles heel

While survey respondents rated themselves "Agree" or "High" on most competency dimensions, their lowest quantitative mean ($\bar{M} = 3.13$), and the only item to earn repeated "Neutral" self-ratings—was theological competence. The focus groups clarify that this deficit is not a lack of goodwill but a structural

weakness produced by three interacting forces: (a) fragmented reference sources, (b) asymmetric clerical guidance, and (c) fear of doctrinal error.

Participants described an "information patchwork" in which each parish invents its own cheat-sheets for liturgical colors, feast-day rubrics, and scriptural captions. Without a diocesan style guide, teams rely on Google searches—sometimes landing on non-Catholic sites—or ask priests ad hoc, reinforcing inconsistency. "Once we used green, only to learn it should have been red; there's no official color list for each feast."

However, clergy involvement varies widely: some priests pre-approve every post; others give blanket trust. Volunteers caught in the middle hesitate, delaying uploads and dampening creative initiative. "If Father is busy, the post stays pending; we don't want mistakes, another priest might call us out."

The combined effect of patchy resources and uneven oversight is a pervasive fear of saying the wrong thing. Volunteers describe "walking on eggshells" when drafting captions about controversial teachings or liturgical norms. This fear drives the default strategy of copying diocesan graphics verbatim, limiting contextualization and parish voice. "I'm afraid to quote the Catechism incompletely; it might be misinterpreted, so I just copy-paste from the Diocese page."

In Eilers' craft–content–connection triangle, theology anchors the content vertex; when that point weakens, output may be visually polished yet catechetically thin, and relational goodwill turns into cautious silence, confirming Bock's (2014) claim that communication falters without a shared theological grammar. This gap surfaces quantitatively in the low scenario score for "linking Scripture to outreach" (M = 2.14) and qualitatively in stalled posts, color mistakes, and copy-pasted captions, underscoring theology as the keystone competence on which all others hinge.

6.4.4. Strategic digital capacity: front-end fluency sitting on a back-end vacuum

Survey scores expose a sharp split in technical competence: volunteers excel with free, front-end tools like Canva/Photoshop (M = 3.07) yet struggle with costlier, back-end systems: CMS (1.97), project-management apps (1.73), analytics (2.59), podcasting (2.02). Focus groups attributed this gap to three reinforcing constraints:

- Capital: "OBS is free; Canva is free. But how can you use a CMS if there's no budget for the domain and hosting?"
- Time: "Even if we want to run analytics, time is the enemy; the next event is done before the data gets reviewed."
- Capability: "Someone teaches layout, but no one teaches project management; if nobody's doing it, we can't even imagine it."

The cycle of limited funds, few mentors, and volunteer time pressures leaves the ministry strong in creative execution but weak in the strategic planning and measurement Eiler classifies as professional competence.

6.4.5. Controversy and misinformation: a double bind of moral duty and reputational risk

Although the critical-competence scenario on handling misinformation scored "High" (M = 1.92), focus groups show volunteers toggle between deleting or locking comments and posting clarifications, guided by a risk calculus that weighs parish reputation, priestly advice and their own digital know-how. Most coordinators favor defensive silence, preferring a quiet page to a potential flame war. "When the bashers swarmed, I turned the comments off to kill the issue—I didn't want it to grow and drag the parish in."

High ethical scores mask a crisis gap: most volunteers, fearing reputational damage and lacking a dialogue protocol, default to shutting comments, an expedient that shields the "parish brand" but reveals thin crisis skills. A smaller group contends silence cedes the field, insisting, "If you know the truth, you have to answer misinformation to correct people—that's our duty as communicators."

However, they act only after informal priestly vetting, highlighting a policy vacuum. The result is a structural tension in which theoretical critical competence collides with backlash anxiety and uneven clerical support, reinforcing the theological shortfall noted earlier.

6.4.6. Training as empowerment, identity-building, and social capital

The Training-Needs Index shows an across-the-board hunger for formation—professional (3.66), technical (3.54), creative (3.47), and even theological (3.44) all score "Very High." Focus-group volunteers treat training not as remediation but as pastoral empowerment, identity building, and career capital, requesting four content streams: caption writing, social-media strategy, visual-craft upgrades, and a doctrinal track to close their theology gap—an agenda that answers Eilers' call for integrated, not siloed, formation.

They favor project-based, peer-mentored workshops, for instance, an Advent reel critiqued for design, doctrine, and analytics, delivered as full-day, rotating vicariate sessions with meal-and-data stipends to offset student budgets. As one participant put it, "Interest in training is very high because the skills are useful not only in church but also professionally," capturing the dual payoff that drives sustained volunteer engagement.

The six themes portray a ministry of dynamic partial maturity: volunteers anchor their identity in a craft–content–connection triangle that reflects high ethical and professional scores, excel in low-cost visual production and livestreaming, yet operate atop a back-end vacuum where analytics, CMS, and project workflows are absent, preventing reach assessment or content reuse. The

content vertex, theological competence, remains the structural Achilles' heel; patchy references, uneven clerical oversight, and fear of error slow posting and amplify a controversy-misinformation bind, leaving teams toggling between comment shutdown and timid corrections. Consequently, a technically polished but strategically shallow ecosystem emerges, unable to convert ethical zeal into doctrinally confident, data-driven, scalable evangelization.

7. Discussion

The quantitative strand sketched a ministry that is ethically motivated (Ethical = 3.31; Professional = 3.31), technically competent at the surface (Technical = 3.19; Creative = 3.24), but least confident in theological grounding (Theological = 3.13) and analytics-oriented skills (CMS = 1.97; project management = 1.73).

The qualitative strand explains the why behind these numbers. Focus-group participants described competence as a three-part synergy of craft, content, and connection; celebrated their pandemic-honed strengths in live-streaming and layout; and voiced anxiety about doctrinal error and back-end workflows. The same volunteers who rated themselves "High" in ethics admitted disabling comment threads when trolls appeared, illustrating how moral intent can be undermined by missing crisis protocols. Likewise, their solid creative self-ratings were undercut by confessions that homilies are posted but never tagged or analyzed. In short, the qualitative data reveal a ministry that is front-end fluent yet back-end blind, confirming and contextualizing the survey pattern.

When the survey means, scenario scores, and six qualitative themes are arrayed against Eilers' (2014) framework, three clusters emerge:

Table 12. Competency spectrum of parish social communicators: strengths, vulnerabilities, and structural gaps

High or Emerging Strengths	*Moderate but Fragile*	*Structural Weaknesses*
Ethical and Professional	Technical (front-end) and Creative	Theological • Technical (back-end) • Critical*

**Critical competence is acceptable in principle but focus group data show it collapses under public controversy.*

Survey metrics and focus-group narratives highlight four priorities for diocesan action. First, front-end fluent but back-end blind: livestreams abound, yet reach is unknown; quarterly "analytics Sundays" and shared CMS hosting would turn the show into measurable impact. Second, ethics without crisis muscle: volunteers close comment threads when trolled; a crisis-communication playbook

drilled in simulations could shift them to confident, charitable engagement. Third, theology as a bottleneck: a diocesan style guide and rapid clergy hotline would cut approval delays and boost doctrinal confidence. Fourth, formation must braid craft, content, and connection: pair Photoshop with liturgical color theory and YouTube analytics with Gospel storytelling. Meeting these needs would advance the ministry from pandemic-era visibility to analytically informed, theologically grounded, crisis-ready evangelization.

Navas' call for "empathic communication" (2022) aligns with the high ethical scores and the volunteers' instinct to rewrite a meme "baka ma-offend ang elderly," (the elderly might be offended) but the three-day wait for priestly approval of its Marian quote illustrates Bock's warning that aesthetics without theology quickly stall (2014). The livestream boom praised in *Church Communication in the New Normal* (2022) explains the volunteers' front-end prowess, yet the absence of retention analytics and hash tagged archives confirms Le Duc's caution that mere "content pushing" risks "preaching into the void" (2022), echoed by a volunteer who admitted, "I don't know who's still watching once it's Communion time." Thus, the literature predicts Malolos' ethical zeal and digital agility but overlooks the friction between empathy, doctrinal rigor, and analytics that this study exposes, signalling the need to braid theological and data literacy into post-pandemic Church media practice.

The study advances Church-communication theory in four ways. First, it introduces a triangular synergy model—competence emerges where craft, content, and connection intersect—offering a workshop-friendly alternative to Eiler's full seven-item grid. Second, it uncovers a front-end/back-end divide: teams fluent in Canva and OBS cannot track retention funnels or tag homilies, revealing that livestream polish can mask a strategic vacuum. Third, it documents a risk calculus in online controversy; ethical zeal is blunted by reputational anxiety, pushing volunteers to disable comments unless rapid doctrinal guidance is available. Fourth, it shows that training is valued as dual capital, prized for both pastoral service and career mobility.

These insights point to an integrated formation pipeline, a diocesan "SOCCOM Academy," where motion-graphics labs are paired with theology-in-media modules, livestream rehearsals open Creator-Studio dashboards, and caption clinics end with misinformation drills. Such braided curricula connect the ministry's ethical and creative high ground to its theological and analytical lowlands, converting front-end fluency into data-driven, doctrinally confident practice. Interpreted within the SOCCOM Academy framework, this approach embodies the triangular synergy of content, craft, and connection as essential dimensions of pastoral communication. The study revealed that parish social communicators demonstrate moderate competencies in technical and creative aspects (craft), while encountering gaps in theological grounding and ethical discernment (content), and in sustaining collaboration and engagement with audiences (connection). This imbalance reflects the dynamics of the triangular

synergy model, where deficiencies in one dimension constrain the effectiveness of the others, underscoring the need for capacity-building programs that holistically strengthen all three areas in digital evangelization.

Future research can test the triangular model in other dioceses and use pre-post designs to gauge whether integrated training lifts weaker Eiler competencies over time. For the Diocese of Malolos, the task now is to evolve a visually polished, ethically mindful cohort into an ecosystem that is analytically informed, theologically rooted, and crisis-ready.

8. Conclusion

This study asked: How do parish social communication volunteers in the Diocese of Malolos perceive their competencies, formation gaps, and training needs for digital evangelization? The findings suggest that while volunteers exhibit moderate confidence in technical and creative skills, they struggle with theological grounding, ethical discernment, and sustained digital engagement—areas that directly affect their ability to serve as credible evangelizers in the digital age. More than a list of training deficits, these patterns make sense when viewed through the lens of the SOCCOM Academy's triangular synergy model: without balance across content, craft, and connection, ministry efforts remain fragmented and less impactful. The study, therefore, underscores the need for a holistic, diocesan-led formation pipeline that not only upskills volunteers but also integrates theological reflection, ethical responsibility, and collaborative practice into their digital work. In doing so, parish communicators are better positioned to bridge the gap between Church teaching and digital culture, and to carry forward the mission of evangelization with both competence and conviction.

9. Limitations of the Study

Several constraints temper the generalizability of these conclusions. First, all quantitative indicators relied on self-reported competence, a methodology vulnerable to social-desirability bias, especially in ecclesial settings where humility is a virtue and overstatement a sin. Second, the study is cross-sectional; it captures a post-pandemic snapshot rather than longitudinal change, so causal inferences about skill acquisition over time remain speculative. Third, the focus-group sample (N = 32), though purposively drawn from survey respondents, may not capture the full diversity of parish contexts, particularly the smallest or most resource-constrained communities that could not spare volunteers for a 90-minute session. Finally, the research is geographically bounded to one diocese; Malolos' proximity to Metro Manila and its relatively robust digital infrastructure may not mirror rural or mission territories elsewhere in the Philippines.

Future studies could employ objective skill audits, follow cohorts over multiple liturgical cycles, and replicate the triangular synergy model in contrasting diocesan contexts to validate the transferability of the present recommendations.

Statements and Declarations

This manuscript used ChatGPT (GPT-5.1, OpenAI) and Grammarly solely for language editing and clarity enhancement; all intellectual content is entirely the author's original work.

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Decoding Digital Narratives: Performance Criticism as a Biblio-Hermeneutical Lens

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores performance criticism as an emerging hermeneutical tool within biblical studies, emphasizing its relevance in the context of digital storytelling. It highlights the ancient oral traditions that shaped biblical texts, arguing that the Bible evolved through storytelling, public readings, and performances. This study underscores the constitutive, epistemic, and critical dimensions of story performance. Through oral performances, biblical stories convey emotional depth and cultural resonance, engaging audiences with their communal and contextual relevance. The text delves into the interplay between performer and audience, illustrating how memory, emotion, and embodiment enhance storytelling. It argues that ancient scribes, far from being mere transcribers, were active participants in preserving and reshaping the stories for their communities. By engaging with the performative nature of biblical texts, Performance Criticism offers a dynamic interpretative framework that integrates historical, rhetorical, and social analyses. Furthermore, the paper advocates for re-appropriating biblical storytelling as a powerful communication paradigm in contemporary faith contexts. The rediscovery of memorization and internalization enriches the performance, fostering holistic engagement that connects mind, body, and spirit. By emphasizing storytelling's transformative potential, the study proposes it as a medium to renew biblical communication and influence cultural paradigms.

This hermeneutical approach bridges the gap between ancient oral traditions and modern interpretative needs, making biblical narratives more accessible, engaging, and relevant in today's digital and post-literate culture. Performance Criticism thus emerges as a vital tool for re-imagining biblical communication in ways that resonate across time and cultures.

Keywords: *performance criticism, hermeneutical tool, story performance, internalization*

1. Introduction

Narratives have always been the most important way to share cultural identity, values, and knowledge. They range from the softly shared stories of a grandmother to the grand stories of ancient cultures and the core stories of the world's major religions. These stories, whether told around a campfire or in sacred places, were not just written down; they were living, breathing experiences. They were performed with gestures, changes in voice, and participation from the community, connecting the past to the present and shaping the future. In many cultures, the line between the storyteller and the story, the audience and the narrative, was not clear. The Bible as we know it today came from a rich, performative background.

For a long time, biblical scholarship mostly focused on the written text, which was seen as a literary object to be studied using historical-critical and literary methods. Even though these methods have led to important discoveries, they often forget that the biblical stories and teachings first thrived in a lively, oral-performative setting. People talked about them, listened to them, and lived them long before they were written down on parchment. The shift from oral traditions to written texts, and now to the digital age of storytelling, which includes everything from podcasts to TikTok, has changed the way we tell stories without changing the basic human need for them. Still, it has also made a break from the original setting in which the biblical writings were performed.

In this context, performance criticism becomes an important and useful way to understand biblical narratives. Performance criticism seeks to revive the overlooked elements of these narratives by asking, "How would this story have been performed?" instead of treating the text as a static document. It looks at the biblical text not only for what it says, but also for how it is performed, including its rhetorical tempo, character portrayal, narrative structure, and social setting.

This approach creates new ways to understand the text's original meaning and impact by looking at the audience, the performer, and the act of storytelling itself. Performance criticism does not supplant conventional methodologies; instead, it functions as a significant augmentation that rejuvenates biblical narratives, emphasizing their intended experiential nature rather than mere reading. This article will look at the basic ideas behind Performance criticism and show how it can help us better understand the Bible's message.

2. Back Drop of Storytelling Tradition

Humans are storytelling beings. That's why humankind is popularly known as '*homonarrans*' (Fisher 1987, ix). Stories are the oldest form of communication in almost all societies. The primitive societies and ancient religions have used storytelling as an important means of education, to transmit and hand down faith to successive generations. Most of the world religions made use of stories in a prominent way. Planthottam (2023, 163) remarks:

> Most oriental religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, etc impart their religious teachings through stories. For example: epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, and Panchatantra of Hinduism; the Jataka tales of Buddhism, are replete with stories. Tribal people as well as people in rural societies continue to use stories as an effective means of communication of pedagogical practices, transmitting values, ethical guidelines, religious precepts, and so on.

Hunt considers storytelling as the basis of religious communication. For him, "it is only by re-investing storytelling with intuition and imagination by re-describing the world, that a sense of spirituality can be restored to people" (Hunt 1993, 16). They are the primary vehicles of faith communication.

2.1. The Enlightenment and Erosion of Stories

Enlightenment was a movement in the 17th and 18th centuries that focused on reason and evidence from the real world. This focus led to a deliberate rejection of storytelling. As a result, this change influenced the field of Bibliocommunication, where the focus moved from stories and oral traditions to the systematic collection, organization, and sharing of information. Boomershine (2007, 1) argues that the Enlightenment effectively eclipsed the biblical stories, stating: "With the development of the Enlightenment, the meaning of the narratives was divorced from their realistic/figural meaning and focused on their meaning as a reference source for knowing a reality beyond the story." The Age of Reason also supported human logic, reasoning, and scientific methods. During this time, objective and analytical thought were valued more than subjective and emotional experiences, which are often at the heart of storytelling.

2.2. New Phase: Story Again!

Even though Enlightenment was all about pure reason, which gets rid of things like smiles, wonder, curiosity, and imagination, storytelling has made a big comeback in the digital age. "The new orality is, in a way, more like the old orality than writing ever was, but it is also a different thing, because it is based on the use of writing and print" (Ong 1991, 136). Digital media is the main reason for this

revival. It lets people create and compose stories in a whole new way. Digital platforms enable individuals to create and disseminate their narratives, by passing the conventional constraints established by print culture.

2.3. Media History of Biblio-Communication

The medium of a communication system shapes and even determines the meaning of biblical events/episodes. Boomershine (2011) traces the historical development of Biblio-communication in five distinct phases: oral, manuscript, print, document, and digital.[1]

2.3.1. Oral/aural communication

This practice of oral/aural communication influenced the biblical writings in a big way. Jesus' teachings and actions were communicated orally. Almost all the biblical oral/aural communications were open, flexible and fluid (Fowler 2009, 6-7). Each performance of a story or oral/aural communication itself is a unique, new composition (Fowler 2009, 7). "People thought about how they talked, so that what they said could be easily remembered-with proverbs, parables and words that had a ring to them and stories and teachings that were made to sound right and good and that had a great deal of repetition" (Rhoads 2010, 159). In fact, most of the oral communication narratives in the New Testament point to the stories that have risen from personal encounters with Jesus and his activities.

2.3.2. Manuscript communication

The original manuscripts of biblical books were written in forms of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (Coward 2007, 162). The best-known manuscript communication systems in ancient Mesopotamia and hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt were first invented in the fourth millennium BCE; it is believed that Phoenicians spread the use of Semitic Alphabet throughout Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE (Fowler 2009, 9). Manuscripts preserved many oral and aural communication practices, with language remaining flexible and adaptable (Fowler 2009, 10). Although the stories were preserved in manuscript form, it performed well in many situations. Even in 'literate' societies in the ancient world, text was largely performed aloud and received orally rather than read individually in silence (Drapper 2006, 73). However, in this era, biblical communication faced many difficulties. According to John Edappilly (2003, 11-13), manuscript communication era was:

[1] According to him, the various phases of communication system determine this mechanism of perception in the brain, the process of composition, the social system of production and distribution, and nature of reception by the receivers. Each medium or communication system has different characteristics and distinct type of meaning (Boomershine, "Biblical Storytelling and Biblical Scholarship" www.gotell.org accessed in October 2021)

> Period of the development of aristocracy; writing became the possession of the literates. Religion takes over final authority through communication. Parchments and papyrus were made using as writing material. It checked the growth of myths. Also, the influence of monotheism, writing became sacred.

These show that religions, particularly Christianity, enjoyed an authority over manuscript communication. Despite this transition to the manuscript format, the chief qualities that the oral/aural communication tried to promote were retained.

2.3.3. Print communication

The Bible in a printed form has made enormous changes in faith communication. With the print media, the Bible became available to everyday. Individuals began to enjoy the power and right to know the source, learn the truth, develop interpretations, and draw their own conclusions (Stanislaus 2007, 279). At the same time, through this communication, we became inhabitants of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy.'[2] With the arrival of print media, individualism became the centre, knowledge of rationality increased, and religion regained its command (Edappilly 2003, 16). With mass production through print medium, language gradually became ossified in a rational, scientific setting with less emotive and aesthetic elements in it. In this era, the intimate relationship between the medium of communication and the biblical message has been diminished. This is because the text becomes dumb or mute, lending no voice to the words. As a result, the listeners missed by way of experience, knowledge and relationship.

2.3.4. Documentary communication

With the emergence of documentary communication, biblical interpretation became very popular. These documents are made accessible to everybody. Rational learning and conceptual communication became the top-most experience (Stanislaus 2007, 281). It opened many possibilities for individual to study the Bible. During this period, biblical commentaries and dictionaries emerged, and the learning process itself depended heavily on written materials. Print communication made the Bible a document of the past and gave rise to a tendency of 'silent reading.' "The experience of the silent reading involves only the eye and brain" (Shiner 2003, 1). But the whole body is not involved in the process of communication. A book does not know how to judge its audience to know when to speak and when to remain silent (Shiner 2003, 50). The print reduced

[2] The message of the Bible which came to us in the form of printed books. Its first existence in the middle of the 15th century when Gutenberg printed the first book. Print medium made a communication revolution on that time. To emphasis this context Mc Luhan used the term Gutenburg Galaxy (Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenburg Galaxy: Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University Press, 1962), 5.

oral/aural world to a world of visualized pages (Ong 1991, 73). It gives documents a feeling of history and theology in documentary communication. Because this biblical communication medium placed too much emphasis on the text's documented character, people's emotional lives lost their vitality and importance.

2.3.5. Digital communication

With the arrival of digital/audio-visual media, biblical communication took a new turn. Digital communication, according to Boomershine (2003, 2), focuses on two aspects—the centrality of sound and the vivid experience as the criterion of meaning. These two factors make digital communication a compelling experience. This makes the biblical stories a multi-dimensional experience both orally and digitally. Therefore, in the biblical communication context, storytelling and its performance have re-appeared in a new form, where bytes replace the printed text. This calls for a new approach to biblical communication in its exterior as well as interior dimensions and manifestations (Palakeel 2007, 32).

This media history of Biblio-communication establishes that the digital age (Second Orality) has brought back the key traits of oral storytelling in a radical new form.

2.4. Similarities between Primary and Secondary Oralities

The new electronic/digital interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village. This return to the oral state is not a regression, but a recovery (Ong 1991, 136). Marshall Mc Luhan's *the Gutenberg Galaxy: The making of Typographic Man* (1962) also supports this idea. Certain similarities in terms of 'oralities' can be traced out from the biblical scholarships of Boomershine (2015), Perry (2016, 2019), Ruge-Jones (2009), and Rhoads (2010):

Medium of communication: Primary orality describes cultures that lack writing, while secondary orality highlights the digital age's technologically mediated communication after literacy.

Role of performance: In cultures with primary orality, a storyteller depends on memorization and internalization. Their performance encompasses not only the spoken words but also their body language, gestures, vocal inflections, and engagement with the audience. In the context of secondary orality, the storyteller's voice, tone, and visual presence play significant roles. Digital platforms offer a new experience of immediacy and closeness.

Reliance on formulaic language and repetition: Cultures with primary orality frequently use formulaic expressions, mnemonic tools, and repetitive elements to remember and share lengthy narratives. Likewise, secondary orality often incorporates repetition and catchphrases for easy recall and to establish a recognizable style. This repetition renders the content more digestible and shareable, akin to the function of mnemonic devices in primary oral cultures.

Participatory nature: In settings with primary orality, storytelling is a collective and interactive event. Similarly, secondary orality also promotes a sense of community and involvement. This illustrates the resurgence of storytelling performance in an evolved format.

3. The Foundations of Performance Criticism

The ancient world experienced faith through oral performances. The Bible evolved through an oral story performance. Multifaceted forms of communication have been used in oral performances in the Bible which include private readings, storytelling, public readings, novels, drama, pantomime, poetry and epic, reading in worship, scriptural chant, etc (Shiner 2003, 37-45). The performance events seen in the New Testament stresses the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God (Lash 1986, 182). In the introduction to his book, *Biblical Performance Criticism*, Rhoads (2010, 1) says, "The oral compositions preserved in the later manuscripts of the New Testament were not originally read privately or silently but were performed in social settings before gatherings of people. The compositions were most likely originally performed by memory, although they may also have been read aloud."

Biblical Performance Criticism evaluates ancient biblical texts as texts created not just for reading but for performance. But at the same time, it should be noted that biblical performance was not merely a process of dramatization, it paved a way for a meaningful interpretation of the text. The meaning of the text was dynamically generated by both the performer and the audience based on their cultural and traditional context. Many biblical scholarships have made it very clear that not all communication events are performances. According to them, what makes a communication event a performance is its re-expression of a tradition. In the words of Jin Han (2025, 1), "Performance criticism investigates the formative force of performative contexts and their elements that contribute to the shaping and reception of the text. In this interpretive methodology, *performance* serves as an inclusive term that covers not only the oral delivery of the text but also the formation of tradition in performative contexts, ancient and modern." Biblical performance emphasizes not only the role of performance but also the impact of it on the audience.

4. Mapping of Story Performance in the Ancient World

There are many pieces of evidence which point to the presence of story performances in ancient Israelite culture and ancient Mediterranean culture. "These cultures valued oral performance much more highly than our culture, and the

ideal for literary performance was purely oral performance" (Shiner 2003, 4). As a result, manuscripts were generally memorized for performance, and they were often recited instead of reading. A few pertinent threads in story performance in the ancient world are mentioned below:

The Hebrew Bible is originated from oral story performances. Later, these performed stories were preserved in writing. According to Niditch (1996, 130), the oral performance, which is dictated to a writer who preserves the text in an archive, creates a fixed text out of an event. There is a slow crystallization of a pan-Hebraic literary tradition through many performances over centuries of increasingly pan-Israelite tales to audiences with certain expectations and assumptions about shared group identity. Later in the process, authors write down shared stories.

The ancient Israelite scribes were popularly known as 'performers' (Person 1998, 602). The scribes took part in the storytelling process rather than simply copying the performance events. Scribes in ancient Israel belonged to oral communities. They provide context for the community they were speaking to, even when they reproduced the story performance in writing.

In this sense, these scribes were not mere copiers but were also performers. Rhoads (2010, 3) explains:

> The writings now in the New Testament were not originally written or received as scripture. They were treated as story-epics, letters, and a prophetic apocalypse--probably performed from memory. They were handwritten on scrolls between 50 and 100 CE. Many of them were composed orally in performance and then transcribed into writing. The handwritten scrolls served the orality of the culture to signal sound. It functioned as aids to memory retrieval for a performer preparing for performance. They were performed, mostly from memory.

It is evident from the above words of Rhoads that the holy text was composed orally before it was transformed to writing. Story performance in ancient world also emphasized the emotional impact. The performer was expected to feel the emotions of the characters and communicate those emotions to the audience. Shiner (2003, 4) says, "Oral performance of the narrative was in a semi-dramatic style. The dialogue was spoken by characters and inflected to indicate emotional meanings." The ancient world of the biblical tradition performed orally to transmit their faith, thereby constituting a communication culture relevant to the context. In a broad sense, Elizabeth Bell classifies performance as constitutive, epistemic, and critical (Bell 2008, 18).

4.1. Story Performance is Constitutive

When something is constituted, it is established, created or given a particular form (Bell 2008, 19). The theory of performance claims that it constitutes

communication culture. In Biblical storytelling performances, a communication culture was constituted through the ages. Biblical text was performed for a community in a particular historical context; it was an act of communication, and the story performance evoked meaning among the audience based on their situation (Horsley 2001, 63-64). There are many components which constitute this act of performance event. Story performance involves the performer, the audience and the context; putting flesh and blood into the manuscript includes inflection, pauses, pace, volume, pitch, gestures, posture, facial expressions and movement (Rhoads 2010, 4). According to Rhoads (2010, 4), biblical stories are composed for performance: it is for an oral presentation. The performer embodies the text: every aspect of the performer's appearance, movements and expressions are part of the story. Meaning is negotiated between the performer, the composition, and the audience. The dynamics of the story performance has a potential effect upon the audience. What is evident here is that oral performances were constituted by storytellers. Hence, story performances are a means of knowing the text.

4.2. Story Performance is Epistemic

Story performance is a way of knowing the actual events of the text. Shiner (2003, 2) makes a very significant observation: "Performances present a more realistic portrayal of actual events. We experience a living person before us, one who has something at stake in the performance. We are affected by the speaker's presence and his emotions. We have an opinion of the speaker and that affects how we receive the performance."

The epistemic character of story performance makes the biblical events closer to us. It shapes our thinking and interaction. Moreover, it relates the biblical stories to our life experiences. The act of story performance opens our mind and imagination to new ways of thinking of the biblical events.

Oral traditions, especially the 'midrash tradition'[3] in Judaism, has followed narrative epistemology. This is because most of the rabbis used to deliver or perform their recitations on the Sabbath, when it was prohibited to write it down. In fact, Brandt (1997, 167) remarks:

> A consideration of the midrashic tradition in Judaism has much to offer us in comprehending and appreciating how narrative approaches to knowledge and relationship have existed for thousands of years and is yet not just recent

[3] Midrash is a form of 'rabbinic literature' consisting of a combination of homiletic forms which may include a given text, its presentation, it's compositional process or a combination of them all. [E. Tonges, "The Epistle to the Hebrews as a Jesus-Midrash," in *Hebrews Contemporary Methods-New Insights,* ed. G. Gelardini (Leiden Brill, 2005), 90]. It is an expository treaty of a given text that is regularly cited within the work (James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Van der Brock, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Lousville Westminister: John Knox, 1992), 42.

> discoveries or passing intellectual fads but true alternatives to dominant technological modes of thought.

What to a modern mind might seem an inferior epistemology is to an ancient Jew only a different one, an epistemology that encourages an alternative, pluralistic imagination.

4.3. Story Performance is Critical

"Performance holds possibilities to… transform a life world and stake claims about that life world" (Bell 2008, 24). Story performance can create a new life world through biblical communication. Whitney Shiner (2003, 171) makes a significant observation that in oral performance, the narrative happens simultaneously in two worlds, the imagined world of the narrative and the concrete social world of the performance context. Therefore, a critical and creative engagement is possible while performing the biblical stories. It can make transformations in audiences or listeners and enter the life world of people of all ages.

4.4. Performer-Listener Dynamics in Oral Performance

The interrelated analytical aspects in the relationship between the audience and the performer have been brought out by Richard A. Horsley, while dealing with the Gospel according to St. Mark. He has treated this as a 'metonymic concept,' which means that a part represents the whole (Horsley 2001, 63). According to him, this concept focusses on how social and political realities of the time are reflected and subtly embedded within the text. He examines how seemingly straightforward stories can function as metonymic representations of broader social structures, power dynamics, and historical contexts. This concept moves beyond a purely literary reading of the text, seeking to understand how this text acts as stand-in for, or an indirect representation of the world outside the text. He contends that the audience of the performed Markan narrative could relate to stories told. In the present day, connotations, phrases and experience can be used to re-create cultural tradition. There can be several sub contexts which employ phrases and emotions which relate to a particular community.

Biblical stories were performed for a community. The inherent meaning of the text cannot be regained through modern interpretations. This is because "the performer of an already familiar story, working through standard rhetorical patterns and strategies long familiar to the audience, summoned conventional connotations of cultural traditions in evoking in the audience a meaning that was inherent" (Horsley 2001, 62). This calls for a new approach in finding out the original meaning of the text.

5. Biblical Performance Criticism: A New Approach

Story performance is a process that infuses biblical communication with new insights, methods, and expressions. When we trace the history of biblical performance criticism, we could find that biblical texts were learnt and delivered by performers like prophets or story tellers.[4] The way the performer articulated the story was decisive for the listeners to interpret the text. It is a process of getting the original meaning of the text. "The performance metaphor has significant potential for the revitalization of biblical interpretation," says Stephen C. Barton (1999, 179). Biblical story performance itself can be considered an interpretation of the text. This is because performance event consists of plots, characters, and conversations that are full of eccentricities, intrigue, emotions, and many other interesting traits (Salter 2008, 50). The inherent meaning of biblical text can be traced through the process of performance. David Roads and other scholars have developed 'biblical performance criticism' as a new approach in this line. Rhoads (2010, 167) espouses:

> Imagining a performative event includes the act of performing, the performer, the location, the cultural historical circumstances, and the implied rhetorical impact on the audience. One could re-orient the methods in the light of oral nature of culture and the texts and the key to this re-orientation is to focus on the performative event as a context to re-conceptualize all methodologies like historical-critical, rhetorical, narrative, discourse and social analysis, and ideological criticism. The performer becomes immersed in the 'narrative world' of the text, imagining its characters, settings and events, its past and future, cosmology of space and time, cultural dynamics, and its socio-political realities. The dynamics of performing also is taken care of.

The basic aim of performance criticism is to make the biblical communication much more relevant to the present-day context. "In order to recover the Bible's power, we have to take captive the imagination of readers and interpreters; we must once again attend to the public reading, or performance, of the Bible" (Juel 1997, 5). David Rhoads is one of the pioneers of performance criticism and he elaborated the topic based on the Gospel of St. Mark. Boomershine was the person who strongly advocated for recovering the oral tradition behind the holy text. Richard Horsley combined performance criticism with social and political

[4] Evidence suggests that ancient recitations were highly expressive, engaging, dramatic, relational, vocal, and dynamic. They were a heightened form of communication. Certain Old Testament prophets communicated dramatically, utilizing an array of gestures and actions to enhance their message (e.g., Ezek 24; Jer 19; Isa 20). Also pointing to original dramatic performances are the various poetic features present in many biblical genres such as alliteration and onomatopoeia—poetic features primarily enjoyed when heard spoken out loud. (https://www.logos.com/grow/hearing-the-scripture-readers-voice-biblical-performance-criticism-in-the-classroom/ accessed on March 25, 2025)

analysis. Holly Hearon (2009,51) explained how letters (Epistles of Paul) were performed in early Christian communities. The above facts show that the performance of biblical stories is re-emerging in the new communication context.

5.1. Re-appropriation of Biblical Storytelling in Christian Communication

Story performance, which was more prevalent in the oral culture, is resurrected as an ideal mode of communication. Modern communication systems have reinforced the need for the re-appropriation of the more appealing, ancient storytelling tradition. Biblical storytelling is lively, memorable, embodied, engaging, and much more effective (Dewey 2009, 152). Sacred texts were not merely read but told and retold, gradually shaping both individuals and communities. The re-discovery of the vitality of oral tradition, learning the stories as sounds and images, telling the stories with passion and excitement was illuminating—not with glaring incandescent glow of the bare bulb, but with the warm, suffusing glow of the flame (Dewey 2009, 150). Re-appropriation makes the age-old stories resound even today through performance and even the oratory skills of the preacher. In the words of Rhoads (2010, 5):

> The performer is viewed as an artist. That was certainly true of the performers and orators of the ancient world. The ancient world valued performance at the popular and at the elite levels alike. There is every reason to think that performances of the New Testament compositions in the early church would have been treated in similar ways – not as scripture readings of short passages in worship but as storytelling and poetic-like performances and orations.

5.2. Re-Discovery of Memorization/Internalization

One of the basic steps to attain re-appropriation is memorization. Memory is defined as both the ability to recover and the process of recovering information and knowledge (Lee 2010, 3). In the ancient period, people recited and performed biblical stories from their memory. Memorization helps them to retrieve and recall the events. Moreover, it gives them emotional freedom to express through performance. Most biblical storytellers prefer the word 'internalization' to 'memorization'. Internalization enables the performer to absorb the story until it becomes part of his/her spiritual life. The performer is, in fact, in the process of becoming the story, since in the internalization process the story's structure, images, feelings, and settings can all be drawn upon. Internalization is helpful in identifying the basic formulae of a story. The listener experiences the same effect due to the unique features of storytelling, and he/she too absorbs the story as his/her own. Internalization enables the listeners to retain the scripture effectively. Overall, the re-discovery of memorization/internalization is essential for the re-appropriation of biblical storytelling/performance.

5.3. Performing Biblical Stories: Paradigm for Biblical Communication

The biblical story performance can be a meaningful paradigm of our time in many ways. The dynamic and holistic nature of this paradigm makes biblical communication more participatory. As Philip Ruge-Jones (2009, 113) argues:

> The impact is holistic. The whole body speaks to each person with their heart, mind, soul and body as well as the whole community. The performance gathers our bodies, our emotions and our lived experiences carrying them for a moment in the story. The whole of our lives finds dwelling places in the spaciousness created by the story.

The Bible can be viewed not simply as a text but as a communication event. This event embraces the speaker, the audience, the text, and a background that eventually results in a meaningful interpretation of the text. According to Peter Perry (2025, 5):

> Performance Criticism seeks to describe and analyze communication *events*. The meaning making is not located in one aspect of communication, but the event which brings together the speaker/author, utterance, audience, and situation. This event is, by nature, ephemeral, dynamic, and processed over time. A communication event is never precisely repeatable and so is ephemeral. Even if the same words are spoken by the same person to the same audience, inevitably something has changed in at least one of the people involved and their perception of the situation. As a result, the inferences drawn are different.

Therefore, performance of the text reveals multiple layers of meaning unlike silent reading of the text. According to Pelias (1992, 159), "The text has a range of possible meanings and a range of possible performances. Through performances, we may be able to identify which interpretations have a consensus, which interpretations are controversial but permitted, and which interpretations constitute a fundamental misconstrue of the possibilities of the text."

Therefore, performance is crucial to assessing the limits of practical interpretations and providing criteria for making critical findings in judgements over interpretation. In the present context, the Bible has lost its telling or performing nature since we attach more importance to the print version of it. But it is meaningful in the post-literate culture. "Church now tends to think of the Bible as a set of abstract ideas based on the study of canonical documents but divorced from story. The Gospel has lost its original character as a living storytelling of messengers who told the good news of the victory of Jesus" (Boomershine1998, 113). It is only by telling the story that the message becomes a Gospel (Walker 1996, 12). Performing the stories can become a channel for God's communication in a more powerful and meaningful way.

Narrating biblical stories can result in a cultural transformation and a change in our perception of the world (Evans 2008, 66). Stories are the language of heart.

"Life transformations take place in the heart. To change the heart is to change the world view. To change world view is to change culture" (Evans 2008, 66). Biblical narratives have an impact on society. Since society is formed by individuals, the changes and spiritual growth that occur in individuals will be reflected in the society. Biblical narratives invoke in the minds of the listeners a sort of catharsis that ultimately results in community transformation and healing. That is why Rhoads (2010, 6) observes:

> Performance generates transformation not primarily for individuals but for communities. Performances in a communal setting create and solidify community. The community has experienced the performance together; the event becomes part of their social memory. The performer seeks to create or strengthen the communal dimensions of the audience.

Therefore, the emerging paradigm of biblical communication can be an instrument of transformation. By giving space in the pedagogy of faith communication, storytelling can become an effective paradigm.

6. Limitations in the Contemporary Context

Performance criticism has its flaws, especially in today's world, even though it has made a lot of important contributions.

First, a large part of the original performative context is no longer available. We can make educated guesses and put things back together, but we can never fully copy the unique gestures, inflections, and audience reactions that went along with ancient performances. This reliance on informed reconstruction suggests that certain interpretations may be solely conjectural.

Secondly, the intrinsic characteristics of contemporary biblical engagement pose a challenge. The change from public, group performances to private, individual readings is a major one. Most people read the Bible on their own, in church, or through digital apps, not at a live storytelling event. So, even though performance criticism can help us understand what the text meant at the time, it may not always be directly related to how we read scripture today. Contemporary interpreters confront the task of reconciling this disparity—leveraging the insights from performance criticism to enhance and elucidate a reading experience that is inherently distinct from the original context of the texts' creation.

7. Conclusion

Performance criticism is a method for understanding biblical texts by looking at how they were delivered and understood in their original spoken and heard

contexts. It sees the text as a living script that is meant to be performed, not as a permanent document. Oral communication reflected personal, emotive encounters with biblical characters and the manuscript tradition helped in preserving oral texts. This was followed by print communication when the printed Bible became available to all. The documentary communication era made the Bible a text for private reading. The present-day digital system opens the way for communication through the audio-visual media. Digital storytelling, which emphasizes spoken narratives, visual elements, and interactive storytelling, can be considered a modern manifestation of this ancient practice. Story performance has been constitutive, epistemic, and critical. In biblical performances, a communication culture was constituted through the ages. The epistemic character of story performance is seen in the realistic portrayal of events. Story performance can also create a new life world through biblical communication as seen in the critical approach. It can transform the audience and enter the world of people of all ages. The resurgence of "second orality," a term coined by Walter J. Ong to characterize a novel form of oral culture facilitated by technology, fosters an optimal context for the innovative application of performance criticism. Emerging as a hermeneutical tool in biblical communication, performance criticism emphasizes the act of performance and its rhetorical impact on the audience. The main goal of performance criticism is to make biblical communication more useful in today's world.

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Reproducing Media and Information Literacy in the Encyclicals of Pope Francis: A Discursive Strategy Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Pope Francis reproduces principles of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in his social encyclicals—Lumen Fidei (2013), Laudato Si' (2015), and Fratelli Tutti (2020)—through distinct discursive strategies. Drawing on Mumby's discourse framework and intertextual analysis, the research identifies four primary modes of MIL reproduction: media discernment, dialogic communication, advocacy communication, and media sustainability. Through thematic coding and textual analysis, the study reveals that Pope Francis embeds MIL into theological and pastoral discourse by fostering critical media engagement, promoting inclusive dialogue, advocating for educational initiatives, and encouraging ethical, sustainable media systems. These findings demonstrate how papal teaching can function as a moral and pedagogical resource for navigating the contemporary information environment, particularly in countering misinformation, strengthening community dialogue, and shaping ethical communication. The study contributes to scholarship on religion and social communication by showing how faith-based leadership can influence media literacy discourses.

Keywords: *Media and information literacy, Pope Francis, encyclicals, discursive strategies, Catholic communication, religious media education*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and what is often colloquially termed "fake news" has underscored the need for robust Media and Information Literacy (MIL) competencies. However, scholars and institutions such as UNESCO and First Draft caution against the use of "fake news" as an academic term, advocating instead for the concept of information disorder, a more nuanced framework that distinguishes between false content shared with intent to deceive (disinformation), without intent (misinformation), and harmful but accurate content (malinformation).[1] This reframing highlights the complexity of today's media environment and reinforces the urgency of MIL as a tool for ethical discernment and civic resilience.

In an era marked by algorithmic manipulation, digital polarization, and the erosion of public trust, the global misinformation crisis has become not only a civic challenge but a moral and spiritual one. While secular MIL frameworks offer critical tools for evaluating media content and promoting democratic participation, they often lack the ethical depth and communal grounding that religious traditions can provide. Within Catholicism, theological discourse, especially through papal encyclicals, offers a rich reservoir of moral reasoning, relational ethics, and symbolic language that can deepen MIL's transformative potential. Pope Francis's encyclicals respond directly to this crisis by embedding MIL principles within theological reflections on truth, solidarity, and human dignity. This study argues that connecting MIL with theology is not merely relevant but urgent, as faith-based leadership can offer unique resources for cultivating ethical discernment, resisting manipulation, and fostering inclusive dialogue in today's media-saturated world.

This article examines how Pope Francis reproduces MIL principles through discursive strategies in *Lumen Fidei* (2013), *Laudato Si'* (2015), and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). These three encyclicals, while primarily theological and moral documents, contain recurrent themes that align closely with MIL frameworks: critical evaluation of media messages, the ethical responsibility of communicators, participatory dialogue, advocacy for media education, and sustainability in the communication environment.

The research draws from Mumby's (1997) discourse framework, which treats communication as simultaneously constructive and political, and intertextual analysis to trace how MIL-related concepts are woven through papal discourse. By focusing on Pope Francis' encyclicals as both pastoral and pedagogical texts, the study highlights the capacity of religious leadership to shape public understandings of responsible media engagement.

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[1] Claire Wardle, "Understanding Information Disorder," *First Draft News*, last modified September 22, 2020. https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/

2. Limitations

While this study offers insights into how Pope Francis' encyclicals reproduce Media and Information Literacy (MIL) principles, its scope is limited to Catholic magisterial texts. The findings reflect theological and cultural patterns specific to the Catholic tradition and may not be directly generalizable to other religious or secular contexts. Future research could explore comparative frameworks across different faiths, denominations, or regional media literacy initiatives to assess the broader applicability of these discursive strategies.

3. Review of Literature

3.1. Media and Information Literacy: Definitions and Dimensions

UNESCO defines Media and Information Literacy as the set of competencies that enable individuals to "access, evaluate, and create information" across diverse media and platforms, with an emphasis on critical thinking, ethical use, and participation in democratic life.[2] While early MIL frameworks emphasized technical skills and message analysis, more recent models integrate civic engagement, intercultural understanding, and ethical considerations.[3] These expansions reflect the recognition that literacy in the digital age requires both cognitive and affective competencies.

Recent scholarship has further emphasized MIL's role in countering algorithmic bias, navigating AI-generated content, and fostering digital resilience. Tiernan et al. (2023) argue that MIL must evolve to address the interpretive challenges posed by artificial intelligence, advocating for educational frameworks that include ethical reflection and systemic critique.[4] Hulin (2025) calls for a "whole-of-society" approach to MIL, especially as youth increasingly rely on generative AI and social platforms for information, World Economic Forum.[5] Meanwhile, recent work by Mihailidis and De Abreu (2022) highlights the importance of

[2] UNESCO, "Media and Information Literacy," *UNESCO*, last accessed July 2025, https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy.

[3] Carolyn Wilson et al., *Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 18–21.

[4] Peter Tiernan et al. "Information and Media Literacy in the Age of AI." *Education Sciences* 13, no. 9 (2023): 906. https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/13/9/906

[5] Hulin, Thierry. "Media and Information Literacy in the Age of AI: A Whole-of-Society Approach*." World Economic Forum*, last modified October 24, 2025. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/10/media-information-literacy-ai/

cultivating civic media literacies that empower individuals to engage critically and ethically with digital environments.[6]

Building on this, Wardle and Derakhshan's interdisciplinary framework for understanding information disorder emphasizes the need to address not only the content but also the emotional, political, and technological systems that enable its spread.[7] This approach aligns with MIL's expanded focus on ethical reflection, systemic critique, and resilience against manipulation, especially relevant in theological contexts where truth and moral discernment are central.

3.2. MIL in Religious and Moral Education

Religious traditions have long engaged with the ethical dimensions of communication, often framing discernment and truth-telling as moral imperatives. Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes the dignity of the human person, solidarity, and the common good—principles that parallel MIL's focus on responsible, participatory, and truth-oriented communication.[8] Scholars such as Pacatte argue that religious leaders can be pivotal agents in promoting media literacy, particularly within communities where faith authority carries moral weight.[9]

Within the Catholic Church, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications has issued documents such as *Ethics in Internet* (2002) and *The Church and Internet* (2002), which explicitly address the need for critical engagement with digital media. Pope Francis' pontificate has advanced this trajectory by integrating MIL-relevant language into high-level magisterial documents.

3.3. The Digital Papacy and Pope Francis

The concept of the "Digital Papacy" describes the increasing use of digital tools and platforms by the Vatican to reach a global audience. Scholars note that Pope Francis' approach is distinct from his predecessors in its emphasis on accessibility, pastoral tone, and engagement with issues such as misinformation, environmental justice, and global solidarity.[10] His encyclicals function not only as

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[6] Mihailidis, Paul, and Belinha S. De Abreu. "Untangling Media Literacy, Information Literacy, and Digital Literacy." *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 14*,* no. 1 (2022): 1–14. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1344751.pdf

[7] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*," (Council of Europe*,* 2017). https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html.

[8] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), §. 160–208.

[9] Rose Pacatte, *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2007), 14–18.

[10] Paul A. Soukup, "Pope Francis and the Digital World," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 39, no. 2 (2016): 42–60.

theological treatises but as interventions in the media ecosystem, calling for critical discernment, inclusive dialogue, and ethical communication practices.[11]

In *Fratelli Tutti*, for example, Pope Francis warns against "a kind of communication that is a sham" and denounces the "manipulation, distortion, and concealment of truth" in digital spaces.[12] These critiques align closely with MIL's call for individuals to question media sources, verify facts, and resist emotionally manipulative content. Similarly, in *Laudato Si'*, his reflection on the "rapidification" of communication technology critiques the ways in which speed can undermine depth, accuracy, and reflection—echoing MIL's emphasis on slowing down to evaluate content critically.[13]

Pope Francis' digital leadership has drawn scholarly attention for its ability to transcend Catholic audiences and engage broader publics through accessible, dialogic, and morally resonant messaging. Narbona (2025) highlights how Francis' use of Twitter and other digital platforms exemplifies a form of "pastoral digital leadership," characterized by simplicity, emotional resonance, and a focus on global solidarity.[14] Unlike institutional or doctrinal communication, his digital presence fosters a sense of proximity and moral urgency that appeals to both religious and secular audiences. This aligns with MIL's emphasis on inclusive, ethical, and participatory communication, suggesting that Francis' digital strategy functions not only as evangelization but also as a model for ethical media engagement in pluralistic societies.

Twiplomacy studies by Burson-Marsteller (2013–2020) consistently rank Pope Francis as one of the most influential global leaders on Twitter, with exceptionally high engagement rates. His @Pontifex account, especially in Spanish, often surpasses political figures in retweets and reach. His later use of Instagram expanded this influence through visual storytelling. These platforms allow Francis to model ethical digital engagement, reinforcing MIL principles like inclusive dialogue and responsible content creation.

4. Study Framework

This study is anchored in Mumby's Discourse of Understanding, which conceives communication as the process by which people create and negotiate

[11] David Loffler, "The Digital Papacy of Francis," *Journal of Catholic Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 4–22.

[12] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti,* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana*,* 2020), §. 50.

[13] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §. 18.

[14] Narbona, José María. "Digital Leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis." *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1–15. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307.

shared meanings.[15] In this view, meaning is not merely transmitted from sender to receiver but is actively constructed within particular cultural and social contexts. For Pope Francis' encyclicals, this means that the articulation of truth, moral responsibility, and ethical media engagement is inseparable from the lived experiences of believers and the broader global community.

The discourse of understanding is especially relevant to Media and Information Literacy (MIL) because it frames communication not as a neutral exchange of facts but as an interpretive process where context, relationship, and dialogue shape how messages are received and acted upon. In papal discourse, this manifests in the repeated emphasis on listening, dialogue, and communal discernment, key competencies in MIL.

Complementing this is Craig's Socio-Cultural Tradition, which situates communication as the production and reproduction of shared cultural patterns.[16] From this perspective, MIL is not only a set of cognitive skills but a socially embedded practice. Pope Francis's teaching engages directly with this dimension by calling for communication that strengthens community bonds, promotes intercultural understanding, and nurtures global solidarity.

By integrating Mumby's and Craig's perspectives, this study examines the encyclicals as communicative acts that reproduce MIL principles both theologically, grounded in Catholic Social Teaching, and culturally, influencing and responding to the norms, values, and discourses of contemporary society.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design using discursive strategy analysis. Guided by Mumby's *Discourse of Understanding* and Craig's *Socio-Cultural Tradition*, the research focuses on how Pope Francis' encyclicals reproduce principles of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) through language that fosters shared meaning and reinforces cultural values.

5.2. Corpus and Delimitation

The primary texts analyzed are three encyclicals authored by Pope Francis:

- *Lumen Fidei* (2013) – co-authored in part with Pope Benedict XVI, focusing on faith as a light that guides understanding, including in the mediated world;

[15] Dennis K. Mumby, "The Problem of Meaning in Organizational Communication," *Communication Monographs* 54, no. 1, (1997): 46–47.

[16] Robert T. Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field*," Communication Theory* 9, no. 2 (1999): 144–145.

- *Laudato Si'* (2015) – centered on care for creation with a critique of "rapidification" in communication and its moral implications;
- *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) – dedicated to human fraternity and social friendship, containing direct critiques of misinformation, polarization, and manipulative communication.

The analysis is drawn solely from the findings chapter of the author's dissertation, specifically the sections on MIL reproduction in these encyclicals. For this article, the material has been rewritten for originality, expanded with further literature integration, and formatted according to the journal's guidelines.

5.3. Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Identification of MIL-related Passages – Reading each encyclical in full and marking passages that align with UNESCO's MIL competencies (critical evaluation, ethical use of media, intercultural dialogue, participatory engagement).
2. Coding into Strategic Themes – Grouping passages under four strategic functions: Media Discernment, Dialogic Communication, Advocacy Communication, and Media Sustainability.
3. Interpretive Commentary – Applying Mumby's and Craig's frameworks to explain how these discursive strategies produce shared meaning and reinforce socio-cultural values relevant to MIL.

Tables summarizing each theme are embedded in the Findings section, with interpretive commentary explaining their theological and pedagogical significance.

6. Findings

This part examines the impact of Pope Francis's theological discourses, communicative methods, and digital papacy on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education, analyzing how his religious discourse, particularly as expressed in the social encyclicals, shapes the approach to Media Discernment, Dialogic Communication, Advocacy Communication, and Media Sustainability. Through an exploration of his teachings on contemporary challenges, denunciations of misinformation, and the transformative role of the Catholic Church in the digital era, this study investigates how his words and practices influence MIL curricula and encourage critical media engagement. It further considers how his digital

leadership, strategic use of media, and integration of media literacy with Catholic Social Teaching advance responsible media use and ethical practices in today's context.

6.1. Media Discernment

Media discernment refers to the ability to critically evaluate information, understand the intentions and biases behind media messages, and make ethical decisions about communication practices. In the encyclicals, Pope Francis frames this not merely as a technical skill but as a moral and spiritual practice—an act of prudence, truth-seeking, and care for the common good.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, he warns against "a kind of communication that is a sham" and laments the spread of "fake news" that manipulates emotions and distorts reality.[17] This aligns directly with UNESCO's MIL competency of critical evaluation, but with a theological deepening: discernment is framed as a way to protect human dignity and build authentic relationships.

Table 1: Discursive Strategies for Media Discernment in Pope Francis' Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
Fratelli Tutti (no. 50)	"Digital media can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation, and loss of contact with reality."	Critical evaluation of media impact	Frames media impact as a moral concern tied to human dignity.
Laudato Si' (no. 47)	"The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart… and the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures."	Recognizing persuasive intent	Links consumerist media culture to moral and environmental harm.
Lumen Fidei (no. 25)	"Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey."	Evaluating information through moral frameworks	Suggests that truth discernment involves humility and patience, countering the immediacy of digital "quick takes."

[17] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti,* § 50.

Source: Author's coding based on Pope Francis' encyclicals.

From the perspective of the Discourse of Understanding, these passages show how Francis reframes dialogue as a spiritual practice rooted in relational ethics with his audience about the nature of truth in a mediated environment.

This reflects Craig's view of communication as cultural reproduction by embedding MIL competencies in moral narratives and shared symbols (e.g., "light" as guidance, "common good" as purpose). Pope Francis aligns media discernment with deeply rooted Catholic cultural patterns. This not only aids comprehension among the faithful but also bridges religious and secular understandings of critical media literacy.

Literature in religious media education supports this approach. Pacatte emphasizes that media literacy in faith contexts should be "both analytical and contemplative," fostering skills while also shaping character.[18] Similarly, Buckingham notes that critical media education is most effective when connected to learners' values and lived realities.[19] Pope Francis's integration of MIL into theological discourse exemplifies this dual focus.

6.2. Dialogic Communication

Dialogic communication emphasizes mutual respect, openness to diverse perspectives, and a commitment to building understanding through dialogue. In Pope Francis' encyclicals, dialogue is not only a social virtue but also a theological imperative, rooted in the belief that truth is best discerned in community and that authentic communication builds bridges across divisions.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis insists on the importance of "face-to-face encounter" in an age where digital communication risks reducing others to abstractions or enemies.[20] He calls for dialogue that is patient, inclusive, and oriented toward reconciliation, a message that resonates strongly with MIL's emphasis on intercultural understanding and participatory communication.

Table 2: Discursive Strategies for Dialogic Communication in Pope Francis' Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes

[18] Rose Pacatte, *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2007), 17.

[19] David Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 46.

[20] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti,* §. 198.

Fratelli Tutti (no. 198)	"Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word 'dialogue.'"	Intercultural dialogue	Encourages communicators to cultivate empathy and common ground across differences.
Laudato Si' (no. 14)	"I urgently appeal for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet."	Participatory engagement	Frames environmental action as requiring inclusive public conversation.
Lumen Fidei (no. 34)	"Faith is passed on… by contact from one person to another, just as one candle is lit from another."	Relational communication	Uses metaphor of light-sharing to describe the personal, dialogic nature of transmitting truth.

Source: Author's coding based on Pope Francis' encyclicals.

Through the lens of **Discourse of Understanding**, Pope Francis presents dialogue not as debate or persuasion but as a co-creative process. The verbs he uses, *approaching*, *speaking*, *listening*, and *looking at*, describe reciprocal actions, underscoring that meaning emerges in the relational exchange, not in unilateral proclamation.

From Craig's **Socio-Cultural Tradition**, these dialogic appeals function to reproduce shared cultural norms of solidarity, hospitality, and mutual respect. In Catholic tradition, dialogue has been central to ecumenical and interfaith relations since Vatican II, and Pope Francis extends this heritage into contemporary socio-digital contexts.

Scholars in MIL education note that dialogic pedagogy fosters not only skill acquisition but also democratic citizenship. Freire's concept of "dialogical action" stresses that authentic dialogue empowers participants to become co-authors of their own narratives.[21] Similarly, De Abreu argues that dialogic approaches to MIL help learners critically engage with diverse viewpoints while maintaining respect for others' dignity.[22] Pope Francis's encyclicals embody these principles by weaving together theological commitments with participatory communication ideals.

[21] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.

[22] Belinha S. De Abreu, *Media Literacy Education in Action: Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives* (New York: *Routledge*, 2014), 61.

6.3. Advocacy Communication

Advocacy communication refers to the intentional use of communication to promote social change, mobilize communities, and influence public policy. Pope Francis's encyclicals often move beyond description or moral exhortation to urge concrete action, educational initiatives, civic engagement, and political advocacy, that align with MIL principles.

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis frames environmental care as a civic and moral duty, calling for educational programs that equip people to challenge unsustainable practices.[23] In *Fratelli Tutti*, he warns against apathy in the face of injustice and urges citizens to use their voices constructively, particularly in the public sphere where media narratives shape policy debates.[24]

Table 3: Discursive Strategies for Advocacy Communication in Pope Francis' Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
Laudato Si' (no. 209)	"Environmental education has broadened its goals… it needs to include a critique of the 'myths' of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset."	Media critique and analysis	Encourages questioning dominant narratives that legitimize ecological harm.
Fratelli Tutti (no. 15)	"The best way to dominate and gain control over people is to spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending certain values."	Countering disinformation	Calls for advocacy against manipulative narratives that weaken civic resolve.
Lumen Fidei (no. 54)	"Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives… it broadens the horizons of human existence."	Inspiring public engagement	Frames advocacy as an act of hope that expands societal vision.

Source: Author's coding based on Pope Francis' encyclicals.

Francis' advocacy-oriented passages place media literacy in an active, public dimension. He connects critical evaluation of narratives with the responsibility to respond—whether through education, community organizing, or influencing

[23] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §. 209.
[24] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), §. 15.

policy. This reinforces the idea that MIL is not only about personal discernment but also about collective action.

Such integration of moral conviction with civic engagement echoes communication traditions that see meaning-making as inseparable from community transformation. The call to "critique the myths of modernity" reflects a sociocultural understanding that dominant stories are not neutral; they shape the cultural environment in which people make decisions. By urging the faithful to contest harmful narratives, the Pope aligns MIL with broader movements for justice and sustainability.

What is particularly significant in these encyclicals is the reframing of advocacy as a shared moral obligation rather than a specialized task for activists or policymakers.[25] By addressing the entire Church and all people of goodwill, Pope Francis positions advocacy as part of everyday citizenship, rooted in the virtues of truthfulness, courage, and solidarity.[26] This inclusivity widens the scope of MIL by recognizing that every media consumer is also a potential media influencer and cultural participant.[27]

Additionally, the Pope's language reveals a deep awareness of media's agenda-setting power.[28] His warning about spreading despair "under the guise of defending certain values" functions as a critique of propaganda that cloaks itself in moral language.[29] In the context of MIL, this becomes a call for citizens to interrogate not only the factual accuracy of media content but also the moral narratives and symbolic frames that accompany it.[30] Such discernment ensures that advocacy is informed, ethical, and resistant to manipulation.

Compared to secular MIL frameworks, which often emphasize technical competencies, civic participation, and fact-checking protocols, Pope Francis' approach integrates moral discernment, relational ethics, and theological reflection. His encyclicals frame media engagement not merely as a skillset but as a spiritual and communal practice rooted in human dignity and solidarity. In contrast, Pope Benedict XVI's writings, such as *Caritas in Veritate*, address communication ethics with a more doctrinal tone, focusing on truth as a metaphysical and theological principle. While Benedict emphasizes the ontological foundations of truth, Francis foregrounds its social consequences, particularly in the context of misinformation, polarization, and ecological degradation. This shift reflects a broader pastoral turn in papal discourse, aligning MIL with inclusive dialogue,

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[25] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.

[26] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 15.

[27] Renee Hobbs, *Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011), 21.

[28] Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*," Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–187.

[29] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 15.

[30] Paul Mihailidis, *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 19.

advocacy, and sustainability. By bridging theological insight with media ethics, Francis offers a model of MIL that is both spiritually grounded and socially responsive—an approach that complements but also challenges secular paradigms.

6.4. Media Sustainability

Media sustainability, in the context of Pope Francis' encyclicals, refers to fostering communication systems that are ethically grounded, socially responsible, and capable of serving the common good over the long term. While the term "sustainability" is often applied to environmental issues, the Pope extends its scope to cultural and communicative life—underscoring the need for media ecosystems that nurture truth, inclusion, and solidarity rather than exploitation or fragmentation.

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis connects environmental and cultural degradation, arguing that the same profit-driven mindset that exploits nature also distorts human communication.[31] A sustainable media environment, therefore, is one that resists the commodification of information and promotes narratives that strengthen, rather than erode, community bonds.

Fratelli Tutti warns against media systems that prioritize sensationalism and division over responsible reporting. Francis calls instead for a communication ethic that supports human dignity and the slow work of building trust.[32] This vision aligns closely with Media and Information Literacy's goal of equipping citizens to recognize, support, and create media that contribute to social cohesion.

Furthermore, media sustainability demands attention to the production side not just the consumption side of communication. Ethical journalism, equitable access to platforms, and community-based media production are part of the "ecology" Francis envisions.[33] In MIL terms, sustainability means ensuring that diverse voices have both the capacity and the opportunity to participate in public discourse without being drowned out by monopolistic or manipulative forces.

Table 4: Discursive Strategies for Media Sustainability in Pope Francis' Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
Laudato Si' (no. 47)	"The social dimensions of global change	Media impact awareness	Links technological and media shifts to

[31] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §. 47.

[32] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 201.

[33] De Abreu, *Media Literacy Education in Action: Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives,* 112.

	include the effects of technological innovations on employment, social exclusion, and the breakdown of social bonds."		social fragmentation, urging sustainable alternatives.
Fratelli Tutti (no. 201)	"The media's noisy potpourri of facts and opinions… can prevent people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply, and to love generously."	Critical media consumption	Warns against information overload that hinders sustainable moral and civic growth.
Lumen Fidei (no. 32)	"Faith is born of an encounter… and should be passed on in every age by means of the language of the present."	Adaptive communication strategies	Encourages sustainable faith transmission through culturally relevant yet enduring media forms.

Source: Author's coding based on Pope Francis' encyclicals.

Pope Francis' framing of media sustainability links the ethics of communication to the broader ethics of environmental and cultural care. In *Laudato Si'*, the critique of technological excess is intertwined with the call to protect social bonds, suggesting that communication systems should be designed with long-term relational health in mind.[34] Such a vision challenges the short-term metrics of click-through rates and viral reach, replacing them with criteria like trust, community resilience, and inclusivity.

The Pope's acknowledgment of "noisy potpourri" in *Fratelli Tutti* reflects a concern about informational saturation, a phenomenon well-documented in media studies as "information overload."[35] In MIL terms, sustainability here means cultivating audiences who can navigate abundance without succumbing to fatigue, cynicism, or disengagement. This requires not only technical skills for filtering and evaluating information but also ethical dispositions toward truth-seeking and empathy.

Sustainable media, in Francis' view, also demands equity in both access and representation. The socio-cultural tradition in communication theory reminds us that meaning is co-constructed; thus, when entire communities are excluded

[34] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §. 47.

[35] David Bawden and Lyn Robinson, "The Dark Side of Information: Overload, Anxiety and Other Paradoxes and Pathologies," *Journal of Information Science* 35, no. 2 (2009): 180–191.

from media production, the shared cultural narrative becomes impoverished.[36] By advocating for inclusive participation, Francis aligns himself with MIL's principle that diversity in media ownership and production is essential for a democratic public sphere.

Moreover, the encyclicals encourage adaptive communication strategies that honor tradition while remaining responsive to cultural change. This adaptability resonates with the concept of "resilient media systems" in MIL scholarship—systems that can withstand disruptive technologies and shifting audience behaviors without losing their ethical core.[37] Francis' call to use "the language of the present" for faith transmission underscores the need for media to be both relevant and rooted.

Finally, media sustainability is presented not as a technical problem but as a moral and cultural challenge. It requires citizens, educators, journalists, and policymakers to resist the commodification of attention and instead invest in communicative practices that build social trust over time. In this sense, the Pope's approach deepens MIL's scope by integrating it into the broader moral project of caring for our shared communicative home.[38]

7. Discussion

The four thematic strands identified in this study, Ethical Use of Media, Critical Engagement, Advocacy Communication, and Media Sustainability, collectively illuminate the complex ways in which Pope Francis' encyclicals reproduce the principles of Media and Information Literacy (MIL). While each theme can be analyzed independently, their interplay reveals a coherent vision rooted in the socio-cultural tradition of communication as articulated by Robert T. Craig.[39] In this tradition, communication is not simply a vehicle for transmitting information; it is a constitutive process through which social reality is produced, maintained, and transformed.

In the encyclicals, communication is framed as a shared cultural practice that both shapes and is shaped by moral, spiritual, and social commitments. By embedding MIL competencies, such as critical thinking, media critique, ethical participation, and sustainable communication, into theological discourse, Francis affirms that literacy in the media age is inseparable from the moral and communal life of society. The socio-cultural lens thus enables us to see the encyclicals not

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[36] Clifford G. Christians et al., *Communication Ethics and Universal Values* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 77.

[37] Sonia Livingstone, "Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies," *The Communication Review* 7, no. 1 (2004): 3–14.

[38] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 201.

[39] Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," 119–161.

merely as prescriptive texts but as dialogic interventions in the global conversation about media ethics and civic responsibility.

7.1. Ethical Use of Media: Moral Foundations of Communicative Life

The theme of ethical use of media, as found in *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti*, and *Lumen Fidei*, situates MIL within a framework of moral accountability. Francis calls for truthfulness, respect, and responsibility in all communicative acts, aligning with the socio-cultural view that shared norms and values are co-constructed through interaction.[40] In this perspective, ethical media practices are not imposed from outside but emerge from ongoing negotiation within communities.

Craig's socio-cultural tradition emphasizes that communication both reflects and constructs social norms. The encyclicals' focus on truth-telling and mutual respect reinforces MIL's insistence that media consumers and producers alike are participants in a cultural system that depends on the credibility and integrity of its communicative exchanges.[41] By grounding these competencies in theological anthropology, the belief that human beings are relational and communicative by nature, Francis expands the scope of MIL to include spiritual motivations for ethical communication.

In *Lumen Fidei*, Francis asserts, "Faith is passed on… by contact from one person to another, just as one candle is lighted from another candle."[42] This metaphor captures the relational foundation of all communication and aligns perfectly with the socio-cultural tradition's view of meaning as emerging from interaction. In MIL terms, it suggests that ethical media use is not primarily about compliance with abstract rules but about sustaining communicative relationships in which truth and trust are shared resources. The Pope's emphasis on person-to-person transmission of values challenges the impersonality of algorithm-driven communication systems, reminding MIL practitioners that ethical use must be grounded in interpersonal accountability.

Moreover, the encyclicals' repeated insistence on truth as a social good echoes socio-cultural theorists' warnings against treating communication merely as a conduit for information. Truth, in this framing, is co-constructed and maintained through dialogue, making the ethical use of media inseparable from the cultivation of dialogic spaces where truth can flourish.[43] In this sense, Francis's vision resists both relativism and authoritarianism, instead advocating a participatory ethic in which all members of a community are responsible for the integrity of shared meaning.

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[40] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 20.
[41] Christians et al., *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, 77.
[42] Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (*Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 2013), §. 37.
[43] *Lumen Fidei*, §. 38.

7.2. Critical Engagement: Discernment in the Cultural Marketplace

The second theme, critical engagement, reveals how the encyclicals encourage believers to approach media not as passive consumers but as discerning interpreters of meaning. This competency is central to MIL, which frames critical engagement as the ability to evaluate media messages for accuracy, bias, and underlying values.[44]

From a socio-cultural perspective, media are not neutral channels but sites where cultural meanings are negotiated. Francis' critique of "ideological colonization" in *Fratelli Tutti* echoes this insight, warning that unchecked media narratives can impose values that undermine cultural and spiritual integrity.[45] The socio-cultural tradition highlights that meaning is produced through interaction between media texts and audiences; thus, discernment is not only about decoding messages but also about recognizing one's own role in shaping their significance.

The call for discernment in *Fratelli Tutti*, particularly the warning against "the proliferation of fake news" and "distorted narratives,"[46] locates critical engagement firmly within a socio-cultural understanding of communication. Here, discernment is not a solitary mental act but a communal practice of weighing competing narratives against the standards of justice, solidarity, and the common good. MIL, when viewed through this lens, becomes a form of cultural stewardship in which communities safeguard their own interpretive agency.

Francis' critique of media sensationalism: "The media's noisy potpourri of facts and opinions… can prevent people from learning how to live wisely,"[47] highlights the danger of interpretive fragmentation. The socio-cultural tradition recognizes this as a breakdown in the shared symbolic environment that communication creates. Critical engagement, therefore, must be cultivated not only at the level of individual skill but also through institutional and cultural reforms that promote deliberative media practices.

By urging the faithful to question narratives that promote consumerism, relativism, or division, the encyclicals model the MIL skill of media critique. However, they go further by embedding this critique in a vision of human flourishing grounded in solidarity and the common good. This moves MIL beyond a technical skill set toward a mode of cultural participation that is ethically and spiritually informed.

7.3. Advocacy Communication: Participation in Cultural Change

The third theme, advocacy communication, expands MIL's traditional focus on analysis and evaluation to include active participation in shaping public

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[44] Hobbs*, Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom,* 21.
[45] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 14.
[46] *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 45.
[47] *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 50.

discourse. Francis' call for citizens to counter falsehood, resist despair, and work for justice aligns with the socio-cultural tradition's emphasis on communication as a constitutive force in social life.[48]

When Francis urges the faithful to "enter into the realities of other people's lives,"[49] he reframes advocacy not as a distant act of charity but as participatory co-creation of a shared world. This approach mirrors the socio-cultural view that communication does not merely describe social reality—it brings that reality into being. In MIL education, this insight transforms advocacy from a reactive stance against harmful narratives into a proactive process of generating alternative narratives rooted in justice and human dignity.

The encyclicals' integration of advocacy and dialogue aligns with Paulo Freire's conception of "*conscientização*" (critical consciousness), which emphasizes the dialogic process of naming the world together.[50] For the socio-cultural tradition, such advocacy is not simply about transmitting messages but about negotiating meaning in ways that reshape the structures of power and representation. This is why Francis' vision of advocacy is inseparable from his vision of community; both require sustained, reciprocal communication to succeed.

In Craig's framework, communication is both the medium and the process through which communities negotiate shared meanings and enact change. The encyclicals' advocacy dimension recognizes that media literacy without civic engagement risks becoming an insular skill set. To be fully realized, MIL must empower individuals and communities to use their communicative competence for collective transformation.

7.4. Media Sustainability: The Long View of Communication Ethics

The final theme, media sustainability, invites a long-term perspective on communicative life. By linking environmental, cultural, and media ecologies, Francis proposes a holistic vision in which sustainable communication systems are essential for human and ecological flourishing.[51]

By describing the "rapidification" of life and communication in *Laudato Si'*[52], Francis introduces a temporal dimension to media sustainability that resonates with socio-cultural concerns about the pace of cultural change. Just as ecosystems require stability to thrive, communicative cultures require rhythms that allow for reflection, dialogue, and consensus-building. MIL's contribution here is to provide tools for slowing down interpretation—fact-checking, contextual reading, and deliberation, so that communities can resist the pull of immediacy that

[48] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.
[49] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 114.
[50] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.
[51] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §. 47.
[52] *Laudato Si'*, §. 18.

undermines thoughtful engagement. Across all three encyclicals, Francis critiques speed, manipulation, and exclusion, calling for a media ethic rooted in patience, truth, and solidarity

Francis's insistence on using "the language of the present" for transmitting enduring truths [53]also bridges tradition and innovation. In socio-cultural terms, this adaptability is what allows communicative traditions to endure without becoming obsolete. A sustainable media culture, then, honors its roots while remaining responsive to the evolving symbolic landscape in which it operates.

The socio-cultural tradition's focus on co-constructed meaning underscores the need for media systems that sustain, rather than undermine, the conditions for constructive dialogue. In MIL terms, this means fostering both production and consumption practices that are equitable, inclusive, and oriented toward the common good. Media sustainability thus involves not only resisting harmful content but also building resilient communicative structures—community journalism, participatory media platforms, and ethical information networks that can endure technological and cultural shifts.

7.5. Integration: MIL as a Socio-Cultural Practice in the Encyclicals

When considered together, the four themes demonstrate how the encyclicals reproduce MIL competencies within a theological framework that is deeply consonant with socio-cultural communication theory. Each theme addresses a different dimension of communicative life, ethical grounding, critical discernment, civic participation, and sustainability, but all are united by a vision of communication as a shared cultural practice oriented toward the common good.

From the socio-cultural perspective, MIL is not a neutral, technical toolkit; it is a participatory process of meaning-making that is inseparable from identity, values, and community life.[54] Francis' encyclicals embody this understanding by embedding media literacy within the Church's mission of evangelization, social justice, and care for creation. In doing so, they extend MIL beyond secular education into the realm of moral and spiritual formation.

Moreover, the encyclicals reveal that the reproduction of MIL in religious discourse is not accidental. By addressing media ethics, critical engagement, advocacy, and sustainability together, Francis offers a comprehensive model for integrating MIL into the cultural fabric. This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship that sees media literacy as a lifelong, community-embedded practice rather than a discrete set of classroom skills.[55]

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[53] *Laudato Si'*, §. 158.

[54] Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," 144.

[55] Mihailidis, *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance*, 19.

Ultimately, the socio-cultural lens makes visible the encyclicals' contribution to global MIL discourse: they demonstrate that media literacy is most powerful when it is both a personal capacity and a shared cultural ethic. This dual orientation, rooted in both individual discernment and collective responsibility, offers a valuable paradigm for educators, faith leaders, and policymakers seeking to foster more ethical, participatory, and sustainable communication systems.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Pope Francis' encyclicals, *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti*, and *Lumen Fidei*, reproduce key dimensions of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) through the lens of Craig's Socio-Cultural Tradition. By framing communication as a constitutive process through which communities build shared meaning, the socio-cultural perspective illuminates how the encyclicals embed MIL competencies into theological discourse.

Four thematic strands, ethical use of media, critical engagement, advocacy communication, and media sustainability, emerged from the analysis. Each of these themes reflects not only the Church's pastoral priorities but also a robust engagement with the challenges of communication in the digital age. Ethical use of media anchors MIL in a moral framework grounded in truthfulness and relational integrity.[56] Critical engagement positions discernment as both a personal skill and a communal responsibility, equipping citizens to resist manipulation and foster dialogue.[57] Advocacy communication extends MIL into active cultural participation, emphasizing the transformative potential of communicative action in pursuit of justice.[58] Finally, media sustainability integrates MIL into the long-term stewardship of communicative ecologies, recognizing the interdependence of technological, cultural, and environmental systems.[59]

The integration of MIL into religious discourse highlights the adaptability of media literacy frameworks across cultural and institutional contexts. In Pope Francis' writings, MIL is not treated as a specialized field reserved for educators and media professionals; rather, it is presented as an essential competency for all who participate in social life. This democratization of MIL aligns with the socio-cultural understanding of communication as a shared, constitutive process. It also underscores the potential for religious institutions to serve as influential partners in promoting ethical, participatory, and sustainable communication practices.

In this way, the encyclicals offer a distinctive contribution to global MIL discourse: they position media literacy as a moral and spiritual responsibility,

[56] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 20.
[57] *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 45.
[58] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.
[59] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §. 47.

inseparable from the broader call to solidarity, justice, and care for creation. This contribution is particularly relevant in a time when digital communication shapes not only the flow of information but also the moral and cultural imagination of communities worldwide.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for different stakeholders in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education, policy, and practice:

1. **For Educators and MIL Practitioners** — MIL programs should incorporate ethical, relational, and sustainability dimensions more explicitly, reflecting the integrated approach found in Pope Francis' encyclicals. This includes embedding dialogue-based learning that mirrors the interpersonal and communal ethos described in *Lumen Fidei*, integrating case studies from religious and cultural texts to broaden the scope of MIL beyond secular media, and encouraging students to practice critical engagement not only with media content but also with the socio-cultural contexts that shape it.
2. **For Religious Institutions** — Faith communities should recognize their role as spaces for MIL formation. They are encouraged to facilitate intergenerational dialogues on media ethics and digital citizenship, promote community-based media initiatives that embody principles of truth, participation, and sustainability, and partner with schools and civic organizations to address misinformation and polarization through shared values of solidarity and justice.
3. **For Policy Makers and Civil Society** — MIL policy frameworks should integrate insights from socio-cultural communication theory, emphasizing participatory governance of media platforms to ensure diverse cultural voices are included. Policy efforts should also support sustainable media infrastructures that can counter the destabilizing effects of rapid technological change, and implement legal and institutional measures that protect the moral and cultural agency of communities in the digital sphere.
4. **For Researchers** — Further research should explore how other religious or cultural traditions reproduce MIL competencies in their foundational texts, conduct comparative analyses between secular MIL frameworks and those grounded in theological or moral traditions, and develop MIL indicators that measure both individual skills and communal capacities, informed by the socio-cultural tradition.

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Beyond the Digital Dharma: Malaysian Buddhist Youth and the Return to Physical Religious Practice

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of COVID-19 in 2020 posed significant challenges to religious organizations, including the restriction on physical gatherings. In response, many adopted social media and developed online communities to ensure the continuity of religious services. In the post-pandemic landscape, many religious organizations have shifted their focus back to physical activities while continuing to manage their online communities. Most Buddhist organizations use online activities as a supplement to their offline religious activities. This study examines the implications of this shift for Malaysian Buddhist young adults aged 18 to 26, a digitally literate and socially connected demographic. Using semi-structured online interviews, the research explores how authority and authenticity were negotiated across online and offline spaces. Findings reveal that, unlike other digital services that have seamlessly integrated into their daily lives, online Buddhist activities have not been fully integrated. Participants regarded online platforms as functional tools for communication but affirmed that authentic religious experience and legitimate authority remained anchored in the temple and its leaders. Consequently, the return to physical gatherings was broadly welcomed, with young

adults perceiving face-to-face interactions, sacred spaces, and guidance from Venerables as central to their spiritual growth.

Keywords: *Buddhism, young adults, traditional authority, digital religion, authenticity*

1. Introduction

The arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 profoundly affected everyone's daily life including work, education, and entertainment. In the same year, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). In response to the pandemic, the Malaysian government enforced a series of Movement Control Orders (MCOs) aimed at restricting movement and reducing viral transmission. When the Malaysian government first implemented MCO, all the schools, government departments, and the private sectors were temporarily closed, and all the movement and gathering activities were also suspended, including religious activities. These restrictions posed significant challenges for organizations seeking to maintain connection and sustain engagement with their communities, particularly religious organizations.

According to Berger (2016), the purposes of religious organizations are to promote teachings and worldview of their respective religions. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and MCOs implemented by the Malaysian government, these religious organizations were unable to carry out their obligation to deliver their respective religious teachings to their audiences. During this period, the Internet and its associated technologies became essential tools for religious organizations to maintain contact with their congregations. This reliance not only facilitated the continuity of religious practices during a period of restricted physical gatherings but also heightened organizational awareness of the significance of digital technologies in sustaining community engagement. This is seen in their increased utilization of online platforms to communicate with congregations, and conduct various religious activities online, such as weekly sermons, group prayers and chanting, talks by religious leader and other such activities that would have normally been carried out physically. The use of internet technologies assisted religious organizations to remain connected to their congregation at a time where they needed the most solace and comfort. The use of internet technologies has given rise to an intersection of religious practices that occurs both online and offline, in which religious organizations conduct religious communication and activities in the physical as well as the online environment.

Scholars have raised concerns regarding users within online communities subsuming the authority of traditional religious structures; the egalitarian nature of these online communities could allow for individual subjective interpretations and misleading opinions of religious knowledge (Possamai and Turner 2012). Growing reliance on the information obtained from the internet, coupled with the charismatic authority of new online authorities and leaders, could lead to non-traditional religious leaders emerging from these online communities, thus resulting in a renegotiation of the traditional religious organizations (Campbell 2012). In Malaysia, there were approximately 34.9 million individuals using the internet at the start of 2025, while online penetration stood at 97.7 percent. Among these 34.9 million internet users, figures show that there were 25.1 million active social media user identities in Malaysia in January 2025, which amounted to 70.2 percent of Malaysia's population (Kemp 2025).

Among Malaysian users the available internet applications, YouTube has 25.1 million users, followed by Facebook with 23.1 million users and TikTok with 19.3 million users (Kemp 2025). Malaysians are increasingly reliant on the internet to provide them with information and to stay connected with family and friends. As the internet and social media have become part of Malaysians everyday life, so too has the way they connect with religious organizations. This shift in how young Malaysian adults acquire and consume knowledge increases the potential for misleading information and personal subjective interpretations of individual users to be mistaken for fact. The internet provides anonymity to its users and allows certain charismatic and vocal individuals to exert their views in a manner that could be very appealing and convincing to some users. The success of online communities is measured through the engagement and participation of their members; this is a conundrum for religious organizations, as they must negotiate the balance of not only caring for their congregation physically but also engaging with their congregation and the larger public digitally if they wish to cultivate a successful online community.

Malaysia is a multi-cultural society with three major races, each practicing separate religions: the Malays practice Islam, the Chinese are a mix of Buddhist, Taoist, or Christians, while the Indians are Hindus or Christians. Within the Malaysian context, religion is linked to race and vice-versa. This makes the topic of religion highly sensitive, as it is intrinsically linked to racial identity, political dynamics, and social cohesion. Racial harmony and religious tolerance are the key reasons given for religious groups to stay within their lanes and not encroach upon or comment on other faiths' practices, beliefs, or internal matters. The promotion of religious activities is typically confined to respective religious communities, particularly given the heightened sensitivity surrounding perceptions of proselytization directed at Muslims. There have been a number of incidents where other religions have been accused of attempting to proselytize Muslims (Chung 2025; Union of Catholic Asian News 2023). Malaysian laws are in place to preserve racial harmony and to penalize individuals or groups who

attempt to undermine it. Therefore, in Malaysia, the goals of religious organizations are mainly to promote their teachings to their respective believers, while at the same time being aware of the sensitivity of religious issues and avoid causing undue conflict or insulting the other religions.

This study investigates how Buddhist organizations navigated the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges they faced in transitioning back to physical activities. This study also addresses the concerns of Buddhist organization as they attempt to engage their young adult congregation, as well as the larger Malaysian community, both online and offline, while navigating the social and religious sensitivity that is part of the fabric of Malaysian society. This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how young adults in Buddhist organizations engage with online activities and how this reliance influences their participation in physical organizational practices. In doing so, the study will provide Buddhist organizations with empirical data on how their community views the changes that have been implemented by the organizations; thus allowing for the organizations to utilize online platforms more effectively in communicating and engaging with their young adult community.

2. Research Methodology

To gain an in-depth understanding of how Buddhist organizations navigated the changes brought on by the pandemic and the issues faced as they shift back to physical activities and their online community, a qualitative research methodology was adopted in this study. The qualitative research method is the most appropriate for this study as it allows the researchers to have a deeper understanding of human experiences, phenomena, and context (Cleland 2017). Three Buddhist organizations were recruited to participate in this research. The organizations were purposively selected based on their level of activity in conducting online events during the pandemic. The moderators of the organizations' Facebook groups acted as gatekeepers, facilitating the researchers' access to potential participants. Initial contact was made with these moderators, who were then invited to participate in the study.

Through their mediation, group members were approached via Facebook Messenger and invited to take part in interviews. Additionally, the moderators recommended individuals who met the prerequisites outlined by the researchers, thereby supporting the recruitment process. Semi-structured online interviews were adopted and carried out to gather data from the research participants. Interviews were conducted between June 2023 and June 2024, with each session lasting 30–45 minutes. The number of sessions ranged from one to three, depending on the respondents' willingness to participate. The advantages of conducting the sessions via technology is that it enables the researchers to eliminate the geographical, financial, and social restrictions of an in-person interview

(Janghorban et al. 2014). Thus, online interviews allow the researchers to reach a wider sample (Hooley et al. 2012). Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews are useful for the researchers to investigate participants' behavior, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Dejonckheere and Vaughn 2019) regarding online religious communities. As such, a semi-structured online interview approach was adopted in this study.

To achieve the objective of examining the impact of the focal shift from online to physical activities of online Buddhist communities on Malaysian young adults as a whole, it is important to ensure the participants are eligible for the study. In this study, 24 participants (14 female and 10 male) were interviewed; all participants were Malaysians between 18 to 26 years old and have been or were currently a participating member in online Buddhist communities. To understand the focal shift of the Buddhist organization, 5 online moderators of 3 Buddhist organization were recruited as participants for this study. With the assistance of the Buddhist administrators or moderators the researchers were able to contact online members of the community. Aliases were used in place of respondents' real names to protect their confidentiality.

3. Reinforcing Religious Authority through the Return to Physical Sacred Spaces

The COVID-19 crisis prompted a notable change in the practices of religious organizations, with an increasing number of religious organizations turning to social media. Many religious organizations adopted social media and developed their online community to connect and maintain relationships with their congregants. The changes of the religious organizations' practices were driven by the need to uphold religious practices and ensure continued engagement with their congregants. As such, a majority of traditional physical activities have transitioned to online platforms, making the online and offline religious spheres more integrated (Campbell 2012) and increasingly blurred (Boellstorff 2015). Nguyen (2021) reports that social media has become the dominant medium used by youths, and Buddhist organizations face the challenges of utilizing and managing these new digital technologies in order to mobilize and engage with their online community. During the pandemic, religious sermons and prayer meetings were conducted online through various streaming applications in order to connect with their followers. Festivals and celebrations were conducted online in a similar manner, allowing followers to gather virtually to participate in activities. The internet and its associated technologies were instrumental in connecting these religious organizations with their congregants.

Despite serving as the main means for Buddhist organizations to connect with their followers, and despite its potential advantages, all interviewed moderators from the three Malaysian Buddhist organizations reported that, in the post-pandemic landscape, their organizations were gradually transitioning away from

online activities and returning to offline practices. Xian Yi (26, male) noted that the organization he moderates for was reprioritizing physical activities and had moved away from online activities: "Our (Buddhist) organization is slowly moving back to the physical. We would like our congregants to attend physical prayer sessions and gatherings. …this way the congregants can connect with the organization and its teachings in a more meaningful manner."

Similar sentiments were conveyed by Yeow (25, male) regarding his Buddhist organization's direction on online activities: "Most senior monks do not believe that online activities are sufficient. …their belief is that the people should be physically present, especially when they are in the initial stages of their path towards spiritual cultivation and understanding. …we (the online moderators) will be reporting physical events and not conducting online activities."

This perspective aligns with arguments by Turner (2007), who cautions that traditional religious authority may be undermined by the rise of online leaders. By reducing online activities and redirecting focus back to physical participation, Buddhist organizations reaffirm and reinforce the authority of traditional religious figures and institutional structures. The moderators and followers in this study did not seek to challenge or undermine their organization. Instead, they positioned themselves as facilitators, supporting the transition back to physical activities.

Yeow (25, male) explained that Buddhist organizations primarily conducted their sermons and prayers physically before the pandemic, and there were rarely any online activities. He stated: "Temples are there for people to pray. …our followers have always come to seek enlightenment and guidance. …I do not think that the internet can do that. Yes, we can have online prayers and sermons but it is different. The internet cannot convey the feeling of being in the presence of Buddha from your computer screen."

It was the COVID-19 pandemic that forced the temples to adopt alternative ways to reach out to their followers, and now that the pandemic has ended, it is natural that things return to pre-pandemic practices. When queried on the gains the organization had made in their online community, Yeow explained that while the organization recognizes the benefits of having an active online community, it should not be at the expense of the physical community. The focus of the organization should be to encourage worshipers to attend their prayer meetings, celebrations, and other such activities physically at their temples, monasteries, or religious centers. Only in doing so can the organization foster a stronger sense of attachment to Buddhism, its organization, and its community.

Being within the physical presence of temples is not simply a backdrop for rituals but constitutes a meaningful environment where spiritual authority, communal bonds, and the experience of the sacred are reinforced. By returning to physical gatherings, Buddhist organizations reaffirm not only their traditional authority but also the authenticity of religious practice as something grounded in

bodily presence, ritual performance, and interaction within these sacred spaces, which is difficult to replicate online. This is in line with Campbell's (2012) assertion that the digital cannot be completely separated from the physical, as rituals and bonds formed in the physical world are also carried into the digital sphere. The in-person presence of a Venerable, an honorific used to address or refer to the Buddhist monks or nuns who have taken vows and are recognized within the Buddhist organization, plays a crucial role in this process, as it reinforces both the authority of religious leaders and the authenticity of the ritual experience.

Despite the benefits that online technologies provided to community members during the pandemic, most participants agreed that they preferred physical activities and events. Most expressed that they felt that in-person interactions allowed for more meaningful personal connections and fostered stronger spiritual and communal bonds with the Buddha, the organization, and fellow community members. The importance of sacred spaces is not new; Mead (1934) postulates that a person's religious self can be linked to places and spaces significant to his or her religion. Similarly, Firey (1945) argues that individuals invest strong emotional meaning into sacred spaces, often resisting changes that would disrupt their symbolic or spiritual value. These insights align with the participants' reflections, which highlight the temple not only as a physical site of worship but also as an embodied space that anchors spiritual identity and reinforces communal belonging. In doing so, the sacred space of the temple also plays a crucial role in maintaining the traditional authority of the Buddhist organization, as it provides the setting where rituals, teachings, and hierarchical structures are enacted and experienced in tangible form. Teng (20, male) stated: "It is where I learnt about Buddhism from the Venerable. …It is an important part of me. … Online is not the same it cannot replace the temple."

A survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2023) reported that online religious activities remained popular; however, only a quarter of respondents felt that they were active participants during online events. Similarly, participants in this study acknowledged the benefits of online religious activities conducted during the pandemic but consistently drew a clear distinction between passively viewing or consuming online content and actively engaging in physical religious practices. Leah (21, female) noted that while digital technologies have become deeply integrated into her daily routine, the spiritual and religious aspects of her life required established rituals and embodied practices that could not be replaced by online platforms. For her, the physical setting of the temple and the presence of religious leaders were integral to authentic participation. She shared: "Now everything is online. It is convenient. However, praying must do at special places. …just like how we must prepare ourselves to pray, the place is also important. …Although I prayed alone (during the pandemic) I still follow what my grandma and the Venerable taught me to do when praying."

This is in line with Campbell and Tsuria's (2021) discussion of authenticity in digital religion, where online practices are frequently evaluated against

traditional, embodied forms of worship. Leah's emphasis on temples and established rituals reflects not only the preservation of religious authenticity but also the reinforcement of traditional religious authority, as authenticity becomes closely tied to the authority of sacred spaces and recognized leaders. Unlike in other areas where internet technologies adopted during the pandemic have become embedded in daily life, these technologies were seen by the participants as a temporary solution, lacking the authenticity that comes with the physical experience and engagement of the temple. The findings of this study suggest that online activities did not reduce participants' interest in offline Buddhist activities; rather, they reinforced the perception that authentic religious practice is grounded in sacred spaces and interactions with the Venerable. Online engagement functioned primarily as a temporary measure during the pandemic, while the return to physical gatherings was a return to an authentic religious experience.

4. From Online Rituals to Event-centric Content

During the pandemic, the focus was to maintain connections, facilitate communication, disseminate information on Buddhism, and provide support during those challenging periods. Buddhist organizations held online events that, while different from their physical counterparts, were intended to continue building on the spiritual efforts of the congregants, as well as provide emotional comfort and sustain a sense of community during the pandemic. Activities such as group prayers and online sermons were conducted not as permanent substitutes for temple-based practices but as temporary measures designed to bridge the gap until in-person gatherings could resume.

Xian Yi (26, male) reported: "A lot of the activities during the pandemic were done as a way to replacement for actual prayers or sermons. …some were easy to do online like the sermons. Many were difficult to do online. …Now we no longer have to do those online and are back to the way things were."

All moderators of the Buddhist organizations' online communities recognized the importance of maintaining an online presence during the pandemic, not only as a means to maintain connection with their followers but also as a symbol of the organizations' ongoing support for their spiritual welfare during the pandemic. Through active involvement, the Buddhist organization reinforces its traditional authority within the digital sphere, reaching out to congregants and extending this authority into online spaces. In actively participating and organizing online activities, the Buddhist organizations indicate to their followers that authentic and legitimate religious authority reside within the traditional authority of the temple and the Venerables.

Yeow (25, male) remarked: "Online activities were never meant to replace offline activities. Being physically at the temple cannot be replicated online. …… The Venerables conducted sermons to ensure that their followers would be able

to receive comfort and support from Buddhist teachings during the pandemic. …We never intended them (online activities) to be permanent."

Post pandemic, all moderators and their respective Buddhist organizations shifted their communication to focus on mainly event-centric physical activities, consisting of reports of post-event activities conducted by the Buddhist organizations. To achieve this, Buddhist organizations' online communication consisted primarily of sharing images from past events that not only signaled a return to the physical gatherings but also reassured their followers of the safety in attending temple-based events. Lokithasan et al. (2019) suggest that social media content with an entertaining appeal is able to capture the attention of young adults and significantly influence their decisions regarding continued content consumption.

The post-event content is relevant and interesting to users as indicated by Wai Qian's (24, female) description of the type of content that most appeals to her on the online community: "…normally event post will capture my attention the most because I want to see what are the events that going to organize, so I can join. Sometimes, they will have post-event post as well, they will upload the photos there. I also will see those posts. If the event is interesting, I will try to remember and join the event next year."

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Buddhist organizations have shifted their focus toward post-event reporting, placing less emphasis on using online platforms to convey the teachings of the Buddha. In doing so, these organizations cater to their followers' preference for traditional, in-person engagement, while simultaneously reinforcing the authority of traditional religious leaders by relocating activities back to the temple setting. This approach helps explain the predominance of event-focused content within the online communities, as observed by the participants in this study.

Zen (23, male) related: "I see their past events and their upcoming events. … If I want to get more detail information about the event, or to find out what event that going to have, I will simply just go to the online community. I can see past events and what is coming next."

Wei Wei (22, female) said: "They promote their classes such as weekend Buddhist classes in their online community to attract students. … We can see pictures of their past classes. This is good for new people who want to join. …The purpose of posting post-event content in the community is to share the post event with others who did not or were unable to attend the event. So through the posting, they will know the event better."

Post-event content enables the public to develop a clearer understanding of the specific Buddhist organization, its religious practices, and the nature of its community dynamics. Buddhist organizations leverage the strengths of social media to promote and publicize upcoming events, aiming to attract a larger number of participants. This is reflected in the shift from using these platforms primarily to

communicate the teachings of the Buddha to utilizing them mainly as promotional tools for disseminating organizational updates and event announcements. Social media serves as an accessible medium through which community members can obtain information about forthcoming activities, with the hope that participation in these events will, in turn, spark interest in Buddhism.

Although respondents expressed a clear preference for in-person attendance, since the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a noticeable decline in the number of participants attending physical events, as observed by Xian Yi (26, male): "After the pandemic when we were allowed to receive people, not many people came. … some came but not as many as last time. …now few years later better but still not as many as before the pandemic."

This decrease in attendance has become a common concern among various Buddhist organizations, all of which are grappling with the same challenge. Malaysian Buddhist organizations are actively exploring and adopting new strategies to engage and attract young adults to Buddhist activities. The post-pandemic communication strategies adopted by the Buddhist organizations are clearly oriented toward positioning physical gatherings as the focal point of communal gatherings thus distinguishing the difference of online platforms as supportive tools and the temple as the site communal engagement. The dissemination of event-related information online provides insights into the organization's activities aimed at altering young adults' perception towards Buddhism in Malaysia. Derek (26, male) articulated his observation regarding young adults' perspectives on Buddhism, stating: "…young people nowadays perceive Buddhism as an old folk religion… which is people just going to the temple for chanting or meditation."

The view that the majority of Buddhist activities are prayers and meditation is one that needs to be addressed. Zen (23, male) emphasized the importance of altering young adults' perceptions of Buddhism by making them aware that Buddhist activities encompass more than just chanting and meditation. He remarked: "Our involvement actually beyond chanting and meditation. We also do some fun activities, and many young people participate activities together. …that is why those post on the events are important. We need to attract new people into our organization."

To get young adults involved in Buddhist activities, it is essential to change their perception of Buddhism and gain their acceptance. Event-related content has been identified as a means to attract the attention and interest of young adults to Buddhist activities. Participants in this study believe that events serve as an initial gateway to capture young adults' interest and participation in Buddhist organizations. Participation in religious events has been observed to not only attract young adults to Buddhism but also to facilitate a subsequent deepening of their understanding and knowledge of the religion (Wang et al. 2020). Seng Li (23, female) mentioned: "…we will only be able to increase others' understanding on Buddhism after they participate in our activities."

As a result, Malaysian Buddhist organizations prioritize event-related content post-pandemic with the aims of capturing young adults' attention and reshaping their perceptions of Buddhism. This also aligns with the participants' views on the online Buddhist communities functioning as a promotional tool for the Buddhist organizations.

5. The Temple as Locus of Authenticity and Authority

In many secular domains, the online practices adopted during the pandemic have become the norm in the post-pandemic era. The use of digital technologies has become integral to daily life, with online meetings, talks, and classes now commonplace (Barrero et al. 2022; International Monetary Fund 2023). During the pandemic, Buddhist organizations attempted to replicate key Buddhist practices and rituals such as group prayers, Dhamma talks, and sermons by Venerables. However, instead of integrating online technologies as part of the organization's activities, both organizations and followers appear to be actively returning to traditional, in-person religious activities post-pandemic. This suggests that the temple remains the locus of spiritual guidance and worship for their followers. Unlike reports from other studies (Cheong et al. 2011; Nahon and Barzilai 2005) that indicate that digital communities could form alternative forms of leadership and authority, the members of the online community in this study do not challenge the traditional authority of the temple and the Venerables. On the contrary, their largely passive consumption of online content reinforced the view that authentic religious experience and legitimate authority reside within the physical temple and its leaders. Online platforms thus functioned less as spaces for contesting authority and more as tools to reaffirm the primacy of traditional structures. This reflects Campbell's (2017) argument that online authority is often negotiated through pre-existing structures, rather than wholly replacing them.

Participants indicated that their decision to physically participate in Buddhist activities was motivated by their desire to enhance their knowledge and understanding of Buddhism. As mentioned by Wei Wei (22, female): "I attend all these Dharma classes because I want to learn and gain a deeper understanding of the teaching of Buddha. …It is about our spiritual self. Learning online cannot reach the spiritual I think. It is different. I know the content is the same but being physically present in the temple is part of our spiritual path. … especially when we are new and just starting on our journey."

A similar statement was expressed by Derek (28, male), who stated that his physical participation in Buddhist activities was driven by the desire for personal enrichment. He stated that his involvement in these Dharma classes and lessons was aimed at increasing his wisdom. For him, being physically present is important as he is able to learn through his interaction with the temple elders: "We can ask questions and receive guidance online as well, but for me it is more

personal if it was physical. …We can reach out to the elders online but I think that if you want real spiritual advice, best if done face to face."

It is not that followers have rejected online technologies as a means of communication with Buddhist organizations; rather, they recognize that while technology offers convenience, it cannot fully replicate the physical experience and is often perceived as a barrier to genuine spiritual learning. Campbell and Vitullo (2016) note that digital space is not separate from the physical space, but rather integrated into the social life of its users. Participants in this study, while still part of the Buddhist organization's digital community, are primarily engaged for pragmatic reasons such as receiving updates on upcoming events or viewing post-event content rather than for spiritual growth or deep religious engagement. Their continued participation in online platforms is thus functional and informational, not transformative or immersive. This highlights a clear distinction made by participants between digital engagement and authentic religious experience, which they believe is better nurtured through face-to-face interaction, communal rituals, and the guidance of religious elders in a physical setting.

Rituals, spiritual guidance, and the meditative experiences undertaken in the physical presence of religious elders and within sacred spaces were described as irreplaceable components of their spiritual journey. Many participants spoke of the peace and serenity they felt when engaging in religious practices within temple grounds, sentiments they believed could not be recreated in an online setting, thus making it impossible to recreate these experiences in the digital setting. As noted by Seng Li (26, female): "…to gain knowledge, I can read and watch from the internet. …listening to the Venerable speak is different. The content might be similar, but there is a difference because we are able to learn from his experience and his example. …We learn to walk down our path not alone but in the footsteps of our elders. I think that is the most important way for us to learn."

The example set by religious leaders as role models plays an important role in guiding congregants on their journey toward enlightenment. While participants acknowledged that each individual's spiritual path is unique and may vary in form and pace, they expressed comfort in knowing that they were being guided by a trusted and knowledgeable elder; this is especially so for participants who are in the early stages of their journey. The presence and support of respected religious figures provide a sense of reassurance, direction, and spiritual grounding that cannot be replicated by merely absorbing information from the internet.

6. Friendship, Authority, and Authentic Practice

Social relationships within these online Buddhist communities are not only built through online interactions but are solidified during physical interactions. The physical events organized by the Buddhist organizations do not only serve to strengthen participants' knowledge of Buddhism, but also connect and bond

participants through face-to-face interactions. Participants in this study ranged from individuals who joined the organization less than a year before the pandemic to those who had been members since their teenage years. Notably, all participants became part of their respective online communities as a result of prior physical involvement with the Buddhist organization. The levels of engagement of the participants within the online community varied noticeably depending on their seniority within the community. Newer members were less likely to comment on postings and were largely passive consumers of content. Ping (21, female), a relatively newer member of the organization, felt that it was unnecessary to participate in online conversations. For her, the FB group functions as a platform to deliver information on future and past events. She stated: "Currently I only use FB to look out for events that are coming up and to see what events that I have missed. This helps keep me in touch with what is going on. …I rarely comment, I don't think I need to. It is enough for me to just see the pictures."

Similarly, Wei Wei (22, female) also did not feel that there was a need to comment publicly on the group. She joined the Buddhist organization through her friend, who was already a member, and most of her decision to participate in the organization's events were closely coordinated between themselves: "…we know each other offline. We are very close and we are always together. So when there is any activities, we will talk to each other to see if we will be attending or not."

It was not only the new members of the organization, but most of the participants in this study indicated that they were more likely to attend activities and events organized by their respective Buddhist organizations if they were aware that their friends would also attend. Siraj (2021) notes that positive peers can motivate individuals to participate in religious activities. Similarly, participants in this study relied on existing relationship structures to guide their decisions regarding involvement in the organization's events. As highlighted by Yen (20, female): "Although I see there the upcoming post in the online community, but I won't really go and register. Most of the time because of my friends or Shi Fu (Venerable) encourage me to join, then I will think about it and attend the activity."

These connections were further reinforced through continued participation between followers, their peers, the temple, and the digital community, creating a cycle where social bonds and religious engagement mutually reinforce one another. Within this cycle, the authority of the Venerables is central, and the sacred space of the temple acts as the locus where Buddhism is authentically experienced and practiced. The moderators' use of online communities serves merely as a tool to encourage participation in their physical events through post event reporting and attempts to leverage the strengths of physical participations. Meanwhile, the digital platforms take on the vital role of communicating digitally to their followers. The Buddhist organizations view physical attendance in their temples and places of worship as a fundamental component of one's journey towards spiritual

enlightenment. Overall, the findings highlight that while online communities remain useful promotional tools, Buddhist organizations and their members regard temple-based activities as the locus of authentic practice and the place where traditional authority is most clearly reinforced. Online platforms thus function as supportive extensions of the temple, but not as substitutes for embodied religious life.

7. Moral Responsibility to Participate

Online participation and engagement with content posted on the organization's social media are indicators of a successful and active community; however, an analysis of some of the Buddhist organizations' social media shows minimal engagement by their users. Posts typically receive few comments, and members rarely engage with one another in online discussions. Both during and after the pandemic, these low levels of online engagement do not indicate thriving online communities. However, this does not seem to be the case for the participants in this study, as many indicated that during the pandemic, they relied on their Buddhist organizations' online activities to keep them engaged and connected with the community.

Heng (24, male) mentioned: "… at least there was some activity (conducted by the Buddhist organization) during the pandemic. If not I would feel like they also have given up. …I appreciate the effort of the organization in conducting the online sermons. …Joining the sermons made me feel I was still part of the organization."

This sense of appreciation was tied less to the content of online rituals than to the organization's commitment to its members. Many participants described joining not out of spiritual fulfillment, but out of a moral responsibility to the community. Many participants voiced similar appreciation for the organization and their efforts in conducting online events during the pandemic. The members' commitment to the well-being of the community aligns with the concept of moral responsibility, which can be seen in the actions of community members who participate in the organization's events and assist other members without expectation of personal gain, but rather because of their commitment to the community (Capece and Costa 2013; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). It is this sense of moral responsibility that motivated some participants to join the online events even though they expressed reservations about the benefits of the events, as shown in the comments by Shan (22, female): "I did join some of the sermons and prayer meetings. …I did not think it was the same as in the temple. It is very different. …but I joined because my friend asked me to and I feel like I am a member so need to support."

Shan's comments highlight her doubts about the authenticity of digital online rituals versus physical rituals. Her decision to participate was less about her

spiritual fulfillment and more about showing of support for the organization and the community. For Shan, her attendance was driven by the obligation she felt to the community and the organization. These reflections show that online engagement was less about spiritual authenticity and more about sustaining community ties and fulfilling obligations to the organization. While digital platforms offered continuity, participants largely saw them as temporary solutions rather than legitimate spaces for long-term religious practice. Unsurprisingly, the lifting of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and the return to physical temple activities were welcomed by all participants. Many viewed the online events as a temporary stopgap measure rather than a lasting component of their spiritual journey. The organization's shift from online to offline engagement symbolized, for participants, not only the end of a difficult and uncertain period but also a return to pre-pandemic religious norms and practices.

8. Conclusion

After more than two years of global struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared on May 5, 2023, that COVID-19 was no longer a public health emergency of international concern. Subsequently, governments began to ease control measures and encourage people to return to "normal" lives. Consequently, many Buddhist organizations shifted the majority of their religious activities back to physical settings. This shift from online to offline, unlike in other areas, seemed to have minimal impact on the community, many of whom had little online engagement with fellow members and viewed online events by the organization as a temporary solution that could not replace physical events. While there are concerns that religious online groups and leaders could replace the authority of traditional religious structures, in this study, that does not seem to be the case.

The findings in this study are consistent with Campbell's (2012) notion of networked religion, which highlights how digital and physical practices are increasingly entangled rather than separate. While the pandemic forced Buddhist youth to participate online, their preference for returning to the temple reflects how embodiment remains central to authentic religious practice. The rituals and bonds formed in the physical world were not entirely transferable into digital contexts, underscoring the limits of what Possamai and Turner (2012) describe as liquid religion, where spiritual practices may adapt to fluid contexts, yet still anchor themselves in traditional spaces of authority. Participants, while acknowledging the importance of online communities in today's digital world, were still unable to fully integrate them into their religious lives, as they felt that spiritual growth and connection required the tangible presence of sacred spaces and face-to-face interactions with religious figures and fellow practitioners.

The transition back to the physical was an easy decision for the Buddhist organizations and their moderators, as they and their congregants shared similar views on the online events conducted during the pandemic. Respect for traditional religious structures and authorities was key in making this transition back to physical events while relegating online communication to the role of reporting and promoting physical events. The limited integration of digital religious events into the participants' daily routines suggests that while digital platforms offer continuity during crises, they do not fully displace offline practices, but rather reinforce the value of physical worship when it becomes possible again.

8.1. Implications for Religious Organizations

Social media has seamlessly integrated into our daily lives, enabling individuals to connect with communities that share similar beliefs. Religious organizations have embraced online communities as essential communication tools, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of maintaining ties with their congregation. Discourses from the participants in this study highlight digital rituals as lacking the authenticity of in-person practice. This study suggests that while digital platforms serve as an excellent means to reach out to community member who would otherwise have been unable to attend physically, they could not replicate the authenticity of worshipping under the guidance of the Venerables within the setting of the temple. While digital platforms are integrated into almost every part of the daily lives of young adults, this study proposes that Buddhist organizations use digital platforms to promote and engage with the community while maintaining spiritual growth within the confines of the temple.

8.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study predominantly concentrates on young individuals' viewpoints, which could restrict the depth of insights gained. It is essential to recognize that elderly individuals, who have adopted social media, should not be neglected. Young adults and older people certainly exhibit different behaviors within online communities (Quinn et al. 2011), implying that the impact of online communities may be different across age groups. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies to include older individuals and investigate the potential differences in the impact of online communities between young adults and older people. Another area warranting further research is the lived experiences of individuals studying physically at the temple, and how these differ from online religious experiences. While this study has highlighted the limitations of digital platforms in fostering deep spiritual engagement, a more detailed exploration of the embodied, sensory, and communal aspects of temple-based learning would provide valuable insights into why physical participation is regarded as irreplaceable by many practitioners. Comparative studies that examine how individuals construct meaning, form spiritual connections, and engage with religious teachings in

physical versus online contexts could help clarify the unique contributions of each mode. Such research would not only deepen the understanding of Buddhist practice in a digital age, but also inform how religious organizations might better balance online and offline engagement strategies in the future.

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Collectivist Culture and Building a Synodal Church in Vietnam: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to argue that the Church life in Vietnam is under the influence of the culture of collectivism, which creates an imbalance between collective faith and personal faith of Vietnamese Catholics. This collectivist culture is shaped through the intertwining of traditional values and religious values throughout the nation's history. On the one hand, the culture of collectivism brings benefits of unity, love, and support in social life and religious life. On the other hand, it tends towards uniformity, group-competence, and inequality, leading to a lack of personal faith. These are manifested in the recent discussions toward synodality in the Church in Vietnam. Influenced by Confucian hierarchical patterns, the collectivist cultural model poses challenges to achieving genuine communion, participation, and mission in ecclesial life. Therefore, the Church in Vietnam is called to intentionally strengthen the dimension of personal faith as a prophetic step toward a more dynamic and synodal Church, both ad intra and ad extra. To this end, the article proposes an inculturated application of the Johannine model of discipleship as an ecclesiological framework capable of fostering mature personal faith within the Vietnamese context. The study employs textual analysis and draws upon interdisciplinary scholarship in social research, religious studies, and contextual ecclesiology.

Keywords: *culture, collectivism, personal faith and collective faith, Catholic Church in Vietnam, communication of faith, inculturation*

1. Introduction

Religion and culture are integrally related to each other, especially in the Asian context. Christopher Dawson (1948) claims that all the great civilizations and cultural creativity went hand in hand with religion. Dawson (1948, 217) opines that "one cannot genuinely speak of culture if the religious horizon becomes so absent or impotent; if detached from spiritual aims and moral values, culture finds itself faced with a spiritual conflict of the most acute kind." In the context of Catholicism, the concept of "inculturation" emerges as the Church's appraisal of cultures in which people live and express their faith (Basas 2022, 93).

In this view, Catholicism is inculturated in the context of Vietnam, and it is expressed in a unique way. It is a mutual influence and adaptation between the Vietnamese culture and the Catholic faith. The faith life of Vietnamese Catholics reflects a culture of collective faith, which aligns with the broader Vietnamese culture of collectivism. The origin of Vietnamese collectivist culture stems from the blending of multiple layers of religions and traditional values throughout the nation's establishment and development. Although the collectivist culture and collective faith offer benefits for the social life of the community, there are concomitant challenges to faith life within the Church in Vietnam. Most prominently, it has challenged aspects of communion, participation, and mission as pillars in building a synodal Church.

The paper aims to explore the collectivist cultural expression in the Vietnamese people and its impact on Church life in Vietnam toward synodality. How does a collectivist culture influence the collective faith of Vietnamese Catholicism, with both opportunities and challenges for building a synodal Church? To approach this primary question is using textual analysis as methodology. It will integrate the results of the social survey on the Vietnamese relationship, the research on the behaviors of the practiced faith life of the Vietnamese Catholics, and the theology of contextual ecclesiology. To solve this problem, the article's aim is to firstly clarify the conceptual framework of the collectivist culture and communal faith in its general features and in Vietnamese expressions; second, explore the concept of synodality in Catholic teaching; third, analyze the impact of collectivist culture on Vietnamese Catholic life toward synodality; and finally, propose pastoral strategies fostering synodality.

As a result, this article argues that there is a need for an inculturation and application of a new ecclesial model to the Church in Vietnam. Particularly, the values of the Johannine ecclesiology will enhance the growth of personal faith in Church members. The Johannine discipleship model serves as a pattern for transforming the Church in Vietnam toward a new community personally attached to Christ (Brown 1984, 84). It does not mean to negate or underestimate the collective life or communal faith in the Church; rather, personal growth in faith of each Church member is in need of enhancement.

2. Collectivist Culture and Communal Faith: General Features and Vietnamese Expressions

This section aims to give the conceptual framework of the collectivist culture and communal faith in general. It then examines how these concepts are concretely manifested within Vietnamese society, demonstrating that Vietnamese culture is fundamentally collectivist in nature.

2.1. General Characteristics of Collectivist Culture

Regarding the conceptual framework, the research on the individualism-collectivism dimension of culture usually originated within the realm of social psychology. Hoang-Anh Ho et al. (2022) reference the work of H. C. Triadis and G. Hofstede to provide a conceptual definition of collectivism. Accordingly, collectivism is characterized by a focus on the goals of the collective, which delineates the in-group boundary. Consequently, individual interests are subordinate to those of the group, often leading individuals to make significant sacrifices for the collective's benefit. Typically, individuals in collectivist cultures demonstrate lower levels of self-expression and self-esteem, alongside an interdependent sense of agency. Core values such as family, duty, honor, and respect for elders hold great significance in collectivist societies. Additionally, these societies tend to exhibit highly stratified or autocratic leadership structures, often referred to as vertical collectivism, and may display hostility toward out-groups (Ho et al. 2022, 51).

Communal faith, in the context of Vietnamese Catholicism, is illustrated in aspects such as a shared hope for communal salvation, institutionalized religion, and activity-driven practices. Communal faith is most clearly manifested in the collective life, rooted in the family context, with the honoring of ancestors as a central aspect of religion. This creates a collective faith in which a hope for "communal salvation" is necessary (Truong 2008, 2). Then it expands into the spirit of the village with the role of the head of the village. This collective life influences the theological understanding of God as an ancestor or a Chief who has power over them and watches over their lives (Hiebert et al. 2000, 95, 106, 132, 201). While communal faith is a source of strength for Christian life, it also carries certain risks in modern society. Structured religious activities can nourish faith, but they can also overshadow genuine personal belief and an authentic relationship with God. Nguyen Trong Vien (2008, 15) evaluates the faith life of Vietnamese Catholics as largely organizational and activity-driven, sometimes even bordering on formalism. Most churches are populated during organized liturgical celebrations yet remain nearly empty when no official activities are taking place. Few individuals seek God on a deeply personal level, driven by a sincere need for faith in their daily lives. When they do, it is often out of a sense of obligation or in

hopes of receiving divine favor (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam - CBCV 2012).

2.2. Origins and Dimensions of Vietnamese Collectivism

To analyze a culture, there are many approaches that can be employed. One of the most important approaches is the indispensable relationship between religion and culture (Cohen et al. 2016). Religion is inherently cultural in nature, and it is critical in understanding individual psychology and cultures (Belzen 1999; Cohen 2015). In this perspective, the culture of Vietnam is a blend of many layers: traditional culture, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Western culture, and communism (Quynh 2016, 38; Ho et al. 2022, 56). All layers of culture and religion, both directly and indirectly, influence the collective mindset of the Vietnamese people. Due to the constraint, this paper only focuses on traditional culture and Confucianism as the prominent factors influencing Vietnamese collectivism.

2.2.1. Traditional culture

The core value of the Vietnamese traditional culture, which shapes the people's collectivist orientation as an intrinsic value, lies in relational harmony. As Peter C. Phan (2005, 24-27) claims, the central moral orientation of Vietnamese culture is summarized as "to be is to-be-in-harmony," beginning with the family as the cornerstone and extending to the community, society, and the cosmos. In other words, the mindset of relational harmony pervades all aspects of Vietnamese life, such as in relation to Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Many Vietnamese culturologists have agreed that Vietnamese culture is based on the paradigm of family-village-country, and family is the cornerstone of any relationship (Hac 2022, 80; Quynh 2016, 4). This paradigm shapes collectivism, or a sense of community, as the core value of Vietnam (Quynh 2016, 4).

The core value of Vietnamese traditional culture, rooted in the family as an expression of filial piety and loyalty, encompasses patriotism. This value is formed throughout the formation of national history in the period of war for independence and peace (Quynh 2021, 11). In times of war, the Vietnamese show their solidarity and unity to beat foreign colonialists, while in times of peace, they show active and positive contributions to national development in political, social, commercial, and cultural fields (Chuan 1999, 277). In other words, patriotism is derived from the cultural core value of harmony in filial piety, which extends to communal loyalty. The spirit of patriotism orients Vietnamese people to have more bonds with their motherland, relatives, and family. Some scholars observe that when studying the characteristics of the Vietnamese, the core values of the Vietnamese people include community-collective values, moral respect, frugal ability, reality, patriotism, love of peace, humanism, and optimism (Phong 1963, 40; Huong 2016, 40). Moreover, the socio-political contexts of communism in North Vietnam (since 1945), and the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (since

1975) have reinforced collectivist patterns of survival, mutual support, and conformity within Catholic religious communities (Thao 2019, 301–305).

2.2.2. Confucianism

Due to over 1,000 years of China's colonization, the distinctive philosophies and religious traditions of China, particularly Confucianism, were brought to Vietnam and have deeply affected the Vietnamese social and religious fabric (Ho et al. 2022, 56; Hieu 2015, 74; Duong 2011). Confucianism's main influence is on the social hierarchy of virtues and relations (Quynh 2016, 35). Influenced by Confucianism's emphasis on social hierarchy and interpersonal relations, personal ideas often seem to succumb to the obligations of filial piety, which involves absolute obedience to the elderly and respected individuals, such as grandparents, parents, teachers, and elders.

The family constitutes the central institution in Vietnamese society, profoundly shaped by Confucian ideals of hierarchy and absolute obedience. Filial piety is instilled from an early age, as children are expected to demonstrate unwavering obedience to their parents and respect toward their elder siblings. This value is encapsulated in a traditional Vietnamese proverb that translates literally as: "A fish without salt will rot; a child who disobeys his parents is a bad one." Confucian influence also extends to family structure, particularly in defining the role of women. A virtuous woman is traditionally expected to adhere to the three obediences: obedience to her father in youth, to her husband after marriage, and to her son upon her husband's death (Thi 2014, 3–4).

In education, Confucianism still affects school leadership, teaching, and learning relationships. Vietnamese students learn by memorizing lessons from textbooks and passively following the teacher's lecture. Lessons are thus structured in a teacher-centered manner. As in family relationship, at school, students must obey teachers absolutely. This system of education, hence, generates a habit of passive learning among students, who are often devoid of critical and problem-solving skills and effective teamwork (He et al. 2011, 98).

Within the community, respect for elders, teachers, and those in positions of authority is expected, irrespective of their economic, educational, or social standing. Moreover, the four cardinal virtues of Confucianism—moral integrity, propriety in speech, modest demeanor, and diligence in work—serve to reinforce gender inequality by implicitly prescribing women's subservience to men. Consequently, this cultural framework fosters a society characterized by male chauvinism (Hieu 2015, 73, 80).

In the political sphere, Confucianism upholds the principle of unconditional loyalty to the monarch or ruling authority. Historically, Confucian scholars and citizens devoted their lives to defending or restoring the royal dynasty (Hieu 2015, 78). Loyalty was defined as absolute fidelity to a single sovereign until death, as illustrated in the Confucian dictum: "If the king commands a subject to die, the

subject would be deemed disloyal if he or she protests." Rooted in Confucian thought, personal honor and virtue were thus measured by unwavering allegiance.

More broadly, the Confucian ideal of relational unity—spanning family, village, community, and nation—has profoundly shaped Vietnamese society into a collective culture. This collectivist ethos privileges communal identity, social harmony, and moral interdependence over individual autonomy. As this cultural orientation permeates all spheres of life, Vietnamese Catholics are by no means an exception.

3. Synodality in Catholic Teaching

Synodality is not a new concept in the life of the Church, but a neologism that appeared in recent decades in the theological, canonical, and pastoral literature. It is rooted "in the wake of the Church's 'renewal' proposed by the Second Vatican Council" (General Secretariat of the Synod 2021). The word synodality, as a noun and synodal as an adjective, is rooted in the word "synod." Both are straightforward for constructing a "Synodal Church" in Pope Francis' vision (International Theological Commission - ITC 2018, no. 5). The *Final Document for A Synodal Church* states, "Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity" (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024-Synod XVI, no. 28).

3.1. Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations

"Synod," in Greek, is composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path). Hence, the root word of synodality, indicates the path in which the People of God walk together. The path or the way refers to the Lord Jesus, who reveals Himself as "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6). His followers were originally called "followers of the Way" (*cf.* Acts 9:2; 19:9. 23; 22:4; 24:14. 22). In ecclesial Greek, "synod" (*συνόδός*) refers to the disciples of Jesus who are called into an assembly, and in some cases, it is a synonym for the ecclesial community (ITC 2018, no. 3).

The emphasized theological foundation for synodality is based on baptismal equality (Synod XVI 2024, no. 4). It lays a ground for equality in speaking, mutual listening, and discerning in the whole Church because all the baptized share in Christ's triple office: priestly, prophetic, and kingly. *Sensus fidei* (sense of faith) is the key for communion, participation, and mission to include different parts of the Church, not only bishops, but the entire Church. It is an inclusive manner for all members to raise their voices and express their insights on the *ad intra* (inside the Church) and *ad extra* (outside the Church). The ecclesiological foundation of synodality is in continuity with Vatican II's renewals and reversals (Rush 2017,

304–305). Synodality aims to reclaim the baptismal identity and mission of a faith community.

3.2. Key Themes: Communion, Participation, Mission

Communion in a synodal Church denotes one faith through the covenant between God and his people, rooted and shaped by the model of the Trinitarian unity and love. Christ is the mediator between God and His people, who reconciles and unites humanity with God and with each other in the power of the Holy Spirit. Listening to the Word of God through the living Tradition of the Church and discerning God's call for his people is the responsibility of all Church members grounded in the *sensus fidei*.

The Holy Spirit is the main agent that enables everyone to contribute, not least the marginalized and underprivileged, to making pastoral decisions for the Church as closely as possible to God's will. The power of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the baptized enables and qualifies them to have the capacity to discern God's will through the teaching of Jesus Christ. *Sensus Fidelium* (sense of the faithful), is the Spirit's gift as a collective faith to discern together and offer advice on pastoral decisions. It means a sense of faith is always in communion with the entire Church, in communion with the hierarchy (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops 2021, para. 1.4).

The most important keyword for the mission is "witness the love of God" to the whole human family. The Church's role in mission is as a leaven at the service of the coming of God's kingdom. "The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centered on ourselves. Our mission is to witness the love of God in the midst of the whole human family… It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world" (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops 2021, para. 1.4).

To conclude, synodality is the nature of the Church's life, its *modus vivendi et operandi*—the lifestyle and culture for living and working in the life of the Church—in the third millennium. It expresses the inclusive manner for the life and activities of the Church, in which all members walk together based on the equality of baptismal dignity, but always in communion and under the authority of the Pope. It is not based on majoritarian votes or a democratic system; rather, it always expresses a communion among all members through the process of listening and discernment together to address *ad intra* and *ad extra* issues of the Church.

4. Positive Impact of Collectivist Culture on Vietnamese Catholic Life

Catholicism was first introduced to Vietnam in 1533 (Phan 2014, 1). From its earliest stages, it developed through adaptation to Vietnam's traditional cultural framework and was, in turn, shaped by the nation's deep-rooted collectivist ethos. Following the family–village–nation paradigm, the family functions as the foundation of all social relationships. This structure reinforces collectivism as a core cultural value, nurturing a communal orientation of faith in which the hope for collective salvation holds significant importance (Truong 2008, 2).

The Church in Vietnam draws upon the ecclesiological models articulated by the Second Vatican Council, namely, the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, to express both the mystery and the structure of the Church. However, in the Vietnamese context, these models are inculturated primarily through an emphasis on communion, articulated in the contextual model of the Church as the Family of God (CBCV 2011). These ecclesial models illustrate the Church's process of inculturation and adaptation within Vietnam's collectivist and family-oriented culture (Brown 1984, 84), particularly one marked by ancestor veneration. The goal is to cultivate harmony and resonance between Catholic faith and Vietnamese cultural values, given the centrality of the family in Vietnamese social life (Tien 2006, vi).

The inculturation of Catholicism within Vietnam's collectivist culture brings both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it enriches the Church's spiritual life, especially in liturgical expression and popular devotion. On the other hand, it also presents tensions and limitations, particularly when viewed through the lens of synodality.

4.1. Liturgical Worship

One of the positive impacts of the collective faith is the vibrancy in the Church worship celebration. Immersed in collective faith or a collectivist culture, the Catholic Vietnamese, in general, are fond of festivals and faith-community activities. For example, this strong tradition of communal celebration is reflected in the Catholic community in Nam Dinh province, North Vietnam, where Catholicism was first introduced (Hai 2012, 5). Today, Nam Dinh remains one of the most vibrant Catholic regions in Vietnam, exemplifying the intersection of Catholicism and traditional Vietnamese culture (Dat 2017, 69). Vietnamese Catholics in Nam Dinh, which belongs to the metropolitan archdiocese of Hanoi, are known for their fervent and emotionally expressive faith, often characterized by external displays of devotion. That is why celebrations usually last for several days, while preparation extends to over a week, and even a month, in some cases. Alongside the religious rituals that accompany the feasts, there are performances, cultural programs, and prayer vigils. These not only attract a large number of parishioners but also appeal to non-Catholics in the area (Dat 2017, 69).

A statistical study in the Archdiocese of Hanoi (which includes Nam Dinh province), reported that among 350,000 faithful, 86.1% attended Sunday Mass, and 11% attended weekday Mass. These figures reflect both the high level of Mass attendance and the deep devotion of the faithful (Hung 2022). In a recent survey (2023), on the religious participation of Vietnamese Catholic domestic migrants, the authors found that short-term migrants (those who had migrated within the last five years) continued to maintain a higher frequency of religious practices than perennial migrants (those who had migrated for over five years). Reasons for the discrepancy lie in the lack of community support and care from parents, as they were accustomed to in their hometown (Huong et al. 2023, 60–61). Indeed, communal faith plays a crucial role in nourishing, encouraging, and supporting the religious practices of its members within the Church in Vietnam.

4.2. Popular Devotion

Catholic popular devotion is more welcome through the integration of the collectivist culture, particularly the filial piety (Vietnamese ancestor worship), in Vietnamese Catholic belief. Xavier Nhien Truong (2008, 9) observes that in the aftermath of missionary inculturation in Vietnam, one of the most profound changes was the reconfiguration of the ancestral altar. The Vietnamese Catholics began to place the altar of God above their ancestral altar. This divine altar was adorned with a centrally placed crucifix, flanked by Saints Mary and Joseph on either side, two candles, and a Holy Bible. Beneath this, they positioned the ancestral altar with images of their forebears. Their prayers were directed towards God and the saints rather than their ancestors. Instead of praying to their ancestors, they prayed for them, particularly those believed to be in purgatory. They also sought the intercession of ancestors who were thought to have ascended to Heaven. Praying to the saints, especially the Virgin Mary, by reciting the Rosary, became an integral part of their religious practice. This form of devotion had its roots in their cultural tradition of praying directly to their ancestors. The missionaries introduced the practice of praying the Rosary, often accompanied by the serene image of Our Lady of Lavang, which deeply resonated with the Vietnamese imagination.

Besides the evangelization of the so-called "religion" of ancestor veneration, collectivist culture encourages Vietnamese Catholics to participate in Eucharist adoration, religious processions of saints, which serve as a nourishment of faith. Catholics also express their faith by wearing religious images and rosaries as signs of their devotion. In their homes, they set up elaborate altars according to their financial capabilities. Wealthier families even erect statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in their yards or frescoes on the walls. In Vietnam, when a small number of Catholic families reside within a community, they often take the initiative to construct a church of their own, even when another parish church is located nearby. The size and grandeur of the church are regarded as expressions of faith,

devotion, and communal pride. When local resources are limited, families and parishioners seek financial assistance from benefactors or neighboring communities. Major feast days are celebrated with remarkable festivity as churches are adorned with elaborate decorations and village streets are lined with colorful flags and flowers. These visible displays of devotion make it possible to identify which families and villages adhere to the Catholic faith.

In sum, Vietnamese Catholics are emotionally driven and thus their religious practices tend to be lively and fervent, even overemphasizing the outwardly expressive (Thong 2010). Collective faith has contributed to shaping the Church in a stable manner, has continued to thrive, and has managed to establish its place in Vietnamese culture.

5. Challenges for a Synodal Church in Vietnam

This section aims to synthesize and focus on the negative aspects existing in the life of the Church in Vietnam that hinder synodality in the dimensions of communion, participation, and mission. They are directly and indirectly affected by the collectivist culture.

5.1. Communion

In discussing the obstacles to fostering ecclesial communion and advancing synodality, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) addresses both objective and subjective reasons (CBCV 2022, 1.3). Among these, the subjective factors are of particular concern because they reveal deeper challenges related to the inculturation of Gospel values within the Vietnamese Church. The CBCV notes that "local mentality, regional discrimination, and inferiority complex are all obstacles for communion. In some cases, pastors also have a responsibility: although most of them are willing to welcome and listen to their parishioners' ideas and opinions, there are still others who treat their parishioners with arbitrary power" (CBCV 2022, 1.3).

The local mentality and regional discrimination present challenges that stem from negative aspects of Vietnam's collectivist mindset. According to Luong Ha Chuc Quynh (2021, 11), one of the defining features of Vietnamese collectivist culture is the village system, which emphasizes close social bonds, loyalty, communal benefit, and unity. While this system fosters cohesion and mutual support, it can also produce problematic tendencies. Individuals may derive their sense of identity primarily from the community, prioritizing collective interests over personal initiative. As a result, achievements are often attributed to the community as a whole rather than to individual effort (Quynh 2021, 12).

The Country Comparison Tool likewise identifies Vietnam as a collectivist society, explaining that "such a society fosters strong relationships, where

everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group" (Group 2021). However, this same orientation can unintentionally trigger competition and comparison between communities or "villages," undermining broader solidarity and communion. Consequently, regionalism, localism, and group-based discrimination can emerge. Nghiem Thi Thu Nga (2021) also observes that one of the downsides of communal culture is its tendency toward parochialism, factionalism, and the pursuit of group-interest over the common good.

The tendency toward arbitrary authority and inferiority complex likewise reflects the enduring influence of both the Confucian social hierarchy and Vietnam's collectivist orientation. Applying Geert Hofstede's 6-D Model of cultural dimensions (2001), Vietnam scores high in Power Distance with a score of 70, indicating widespread acceptance of hierarchical structures and central authority. In such contexts, hierarchy is viewed as natural and unquestionable, subordinates expect to be directed, and the ideal leader is a benevolent autocrat. Challenges to authority are often discouraged (Group 2021; Ho et al. 2022, 51).

This mindset is rooted in the Confucian concept of the Three Bonds, which emphasize the hierarchical relationships between ruler and subject, teacher and student, and father and son (Thi 2014, 3). According to Ly Tung Hieu (2015, 72, 78), one of the more negative impacts of Confucianism on Vietnamese culture is its insistence on absolute loyalty to authority figures, particularly the ruler, to whom individuals are expected to devote their lives unconditionally. Within the Church, this cultural pattern translates into an uncritical deference to ecclesial hierarchy. Many faithful, and even clergy, may hesitate to question authority, reflecting what the CBCV describes as a persistent fear of criticizing the hierarchy (CBCV 2022, 5.1). This cultural dynamic can lead some priests to adopt a leadership style that resembles that of a "king" rather than embodying the servant leadership envisioned by the Gospel.

5.2. Participation

The concept of superiority-inferiority is deeply embedded in the Confucian worldview, which distinguishes between rulers and subjects as well as between men and women. These distinctions reinforce hierarchical and unequal relationships within society. According to Hieu (2015, 73), Confucianism permeated Vietnamese culture and divided society into two broad classes. The first consisted of Confucian scholars, elites, and government officials, while the second included farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. The former group assumed responsibility for governance, whereas the latter was expected to obey and support their directives commands.

From a gender perspective, Confucianism established a patriarchal social order that upheld male dominance and often promoted extreme forms of chauvinism (Hieu 2015, 73). Jung Sun Oh, drawing on the insights of feminist scholars such as Phyllis Andors and Rosemary R. Ruether, affirms that

Confucianism functions as a hierarchical, authoritarian, and patriarchal system. As Andors argues, its structures reinforce gender inequality, while Ruether emphasizes that Asian women experience a dual oppression under traditional Confucian patriarchy (Oh 2024). The moral expectations imposed on women—summarized in the "three obediences" and "four virtues"—confined them to domestic duties and subservience to men. Moreover, Confucian educational systems were reserved exclusively for men, further institutionalizing gender discrimination and limiting women's participation in public and religious life (Hieu 2015, 80).

This exclusion continues to affect the Church's social relationships and the full participation of women in ecclesial activities. The National Synthesis of the Diocesan Synodal Phase acknowledges that "Asian culture with its gender prejudice and a tendency of promoting hierarchy also impacts one's willingness to listen to women and the poor in society and in the Church" (CBCV 2022, 2.3). Thus, a deeper dialogue between Gospel values and cultural traditions is essential to identify areas of convergence, engage in appreciative comparison, and address points of respectful disagreement.

Within this cultural framework, the Church in Vietnam faces ongoing challenges related to equality and co-responsibility in participation. Many laypeople express deep joy, honor, and happiness in serving the Church, recognizing both their dignity as children of God and their shared responsibility for the Church's mission. Yet inequalities remain, particularly in the relationship between clergy and parishioners. The Synodal Diocesan Synthesis highlights this concern, stating that "pastors should not treat members of parish councils as their servants, but as their helpers and co-workers in the vineyard of God" (CBCV 2022, 4.2). Despite these reminders, some faithful remain hesitant to confront abuses of authority due to fear of retaliation, while others feel inferior because of limited education, leading them to believe they have little to contribute to the Church's intellectual or pastoral life (CBCV 2022, 5.1).

These attitudes stem from the Confucian legacy of hierarchism and its influence on education. In the Confucian system, a student's absolute obedience to the teacher discourages critical thinking and innovation (Ly 2021, 77). This mentality upholds the belief that the teacher's—or, by extension, the authority's—teachings represent absolute truth. As Ho et al. (2022, 56) observe, such a system reinforces the superiority of the teacher and the subordination of the learner. In the ecclesial context, this dynamic is often mirrored in the priest-parishioner relationship, where deference to authority can suppress open dialogue and mutual accountability.

In cultures shaped by Confucian hierarchy, questioning those with higher status or education is considered disrespectful, whereas in individualistic societies, critique is viewed as an expression of personal insight and intellectual engagement (Triandis 2018; Cohen et al., 2016, 1238). This cultural difference highlights a

significant pastoral challenge for Vietnamese Catholicism; that is, the deeply rooted norms of obedience and hierarchy may hinder the development of authentic synodality, which depends on mutual listening, co-responsibility, and shared discernment.

5.3. Mission

Mission in the Church in Vietnam is largely limited to the transmission of faith from one generation to the next. There is little emphasis on evangelization among non-believers and non-Catholics. According to the CBCV Report (2022, 6.1–6.2), several factors contribute to this limited effectiveness: the lack of missionary priority within diocesan agendas; inadequate witness in the lives of clergy; insufficient catechetical formation that leaves the faithful unconfident in sharing their faith; and the persistent mindset that mission is the exclusive responsibility of priests and religious. At the core of these challenges lies a lack of awareness of the Church's missionary identity and of each believer's personal responsibility as a missionary disciple. In practice, many lay Catholics exhibit passivity and indifference toward evangelization, a disposition also evident among some members of the Church hierarchy (Long 2017, 1.5).

Authentic discipleship, however, entails a personal journey of faith that emerges from an intimate encounter with Jesus, the Master. Yet within a collectivist culture such as Vietnam's, communal expressions of faith often overshadow the personal dimension of spiritual growth and individual autonomy. Psychologically, collectivism tends to foster dependence on group norms and conformity to collective behavior, discouraging initiative and personal accountability. Consequently, many Vietnamese Catholics rely heavily on hierarchical leadership for spiritual direction. Thus, while Vietnamese Catholics demonstrate strong fidelity in maintaining their faith, they frequently lack missionary zeal, perceiving evangelization as someone else's duty and focusing primarily on personal salvation rather than faith-sharing (Long 2017, 1.6).

Another significant obstacle to effective evangelization is the weak Christological foundation among many Catholics. Long (2017, 1.7) asserts that to evangelize effectively, especially in a culture deeply influenced by the "*Tam giáo*" (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism), Catholics must possess a deep understanding of Christian theology, particularly who Jesus Christ is, what he taught, and how his life and message answer to human affairs and salvation in contemporary times. He acknowledges the shortcomings that most Vietnamese Catholics, including clergy and religious, have limited knowledge of Scripture and Church teachings. As a result, faith often fails to translate into concrete witness within society due to the lack of integration between faith and daily life. The Church's vitality tends to manifest outwardly through devotional practices, such as attending Mass, joining pilgrimages, or organizing celebrations, rather than through active evangelization and transformative engagement with the world.

In conclusion, the limited effectiveness of the Church's mission in Vietnam reflects, in part, the constraining effects of a collectivist religious culture that overlooks personal discipleship and missionary awareness. Vietnamese Catholics often depend excessively on hierarchical leadership or confine their faith expression to ritual observance. Within such a context, personal maturity in faith and knowledge of God becomes a challenge, revealing the tension between communal religiosity and the individual call to missionary discipleship.

6. Going Forward: Practical Steps on the Synodal Path

In order to address the current reality of the Vietnamese Church, this section proposes applying the values of the Johannine model of discipleship as an individualist ecclesiology to the Church in Vietnam. In brief, the Johannine individualist ecclesiology lies at the heart of the theology of personality. Embodied in the love of God in Jesus, it mainly emphasizes intimate relationship with Jesus. Raymond E. Brown (1984, 84) describes the Johannine Church by echoing themes articulated by Eduard Schweizer, "the more strongly the direct union of the believer with Christ is emphasized, the more clearly he is seen as an individual." Brown's book, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, reflects his view that, unlike the strong sense of collectivity seen in Colossians and Ephesians, the Church in John differently emphasizes the individual Christian's relationship to Jesus Christ. While acknowledging a strain of collectivism in John's metaphor of the vine and the branches (Jn 15) and the shepherd and flock (Jn 10), he argues that John offers "an unparalleled concentration on the relation of the individual believer to Jesus."

Further, John's gospel presents a vision of the Church as a community of disciples that adheres to Christ, gathering individuals who positively respond to God's revelation and salvation through Jesus Christ (Nereparampil 1979, 172). For John, discipleship is not only identified with the Twelve but includes believers portrayed through the literary device of the Johannine characterization. The term 'disciple' (*μαθητής*) occurs more often in John than in any Synoptic Gospel. In comparison, it appears seventy-three times in Matthew; forty-six times in Mark; thirty-seven times in Luke; and seventy-eight times in John (Huntsman 2019, 315). Some scholars correctly observe that discipleship in John is a primary category, and it can significantly contribute to the Johannine ecclesiology (Brown 1984, 84; Culpepper 1983, 115-125). All of these contribute to the vision of the Johannine Church—the community of disciples—in terms of the individualist discipleship ecclesiology.

Practically, as Brown (1984, 100) observes, ecclesiological models that emphasize collectivity are not suitable for highly structured societies, as they tend to foster institutionalism and hierarchicalism, particularly in the differentiation between the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of all believers. This

observation clearly applies to Vietnamese society, where hierarchical structures, institutional tendencies within the Church, and a culture of collectivism are deeply rooted. In contrast, an ecclesiological model of discipleship that prioritizes individuality within the community is strongly recommended. Emphasizing individuality in communal life fosters holistic personal faith development.

Within the framework of fostering individuality in the Johannine community of discipleship, the Gospel of John presents four defining characteristics of authentic discipleship. Scholars such as Du Rand (1991), Culpepper (1983), and Chennattu (2006) identify these as the *divine call, believing–knowing, following–abiding, and witnessing-love*. Together, these elements articulate a dynamic process of being and becoming a true disciple of Jesus, emphasizing personal encounter, faith, and relational fidelity. This Johannine model of discipleship offers valuable insights for the Church in Vietnam, providing a theological foundation for nurturing personal faith within a strongly collectivist culture. Appropriately inculturated, it can serve as a purifying and balancing force against the extremes of communal conformity that often inhibit individual spiritual growth.

6.1. A Divine Call

In terms of historical criticism, the Johannine community symbolizes the "remnant of God" because Israel and the world reject God, "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11). According to Lucius Nereparampil (1979, 172), this remnant community believes in Jesus Christ and his words, so they receive the privilege of becoming the children of God: "But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). Thus, the identity of the new community is the community of the children of God. For its divine origin is from above, "…who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God" (Jn 1:13). This new birth is through the power of the Holy Spirit through baptism (Jn 3:5-8). As the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 clearly explains the role of the Holy Spirit in the new birth of believers in Jesus. Therefore, the Johannine ecclesial model of discipleship is first and foremost deeply rooted in the foundation of baptism.

This baptismal foundation fosters equality among the members of the Johannine Church, which can be suitably applied to the Church in Vietnam. Promoting baptismal charism is an important means of supporting the journey of discipleship formation. When the faithful understand their baptismal dignity, they become more confident and responsible in the work of evangelization and thus a greater participation in the Church's mission. In particular, the charism of the prophetic office should be emphasized within the Vietnamese Catholic context, as it plays a vital role in the communication and witness of faith.

In terms of the *sensus fidei,* the faithful, through baptism, participate in Christ's threefold office: the prophetic (teaching), priestly (sanctifying), and kingly

(governing) offices. Ormond Rush (2017, 310) notes that *Lumen Gentium* 12 offers the classic articulation of the *sensus fidelium*, affirming that "the whole body of the faithful" participates in the prophetic office of the Church because the Spirit bestows upon all the faithful a supernatural sense of faith. This understanding reflects the teaching of Pope Francis on synodality, which insists that the Holy Spirit is not the exclusive possession of the hierarchy but is given to all believers. Synodality, therefore, is characterized by mutual listening, wherein everyone has something to contribute and something to learn. As Pope Francis (2016) states, "Let us trust in our People, in their memory and in their 'sense of smell,' let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our People that this Spirit is not merely the 'property' of the ecclesial hierarchy."

In light of this, the Church in Vietnam is encouraged to cultivate a culture of mutual listening and shared decision-making between the hierarchy and the laity at every level of ecclesial life. This collaboration should extend beyond doctrinal matters to include pastoral decisions as well (Rush 2017, 311). Active consultation of the faithful, therefore, is not only desirable but essential for the Church's pastoral vitality and authentic synodality in Vietnam.

6.2. Believing-Knowing

According to Rand (1991, 317), the basic condition for becoming a disciple of Jesus is the understanding of Jesus' identity. The nature of this understanding should be projected on the relationship between Jesus and his Father. As the Father knows Jesus and vice versa, the response of the disciples is also modeled on Jesus' response to the Father, that is, to listen and to follow (cf. Jn 14:7, 9). Knowing and believing go together for a proper perception and understanding of Jesus. It is only believers, "his own," who share the relationship of knowledge with Jesus, can know and recognize His voice, and follow Him. However, the disciples' failure to know and understand Jesus was a reality in Jesus' ministry prior to his glorification (cf. Jn 14:4-9; 16:18). Unlike the Gospel of Mark, in John, misunderstanding is not an element that poses a threat to being a disciple (Culpepper 1983, 117). Rather, misunderstanding is part of a pattern in Johannine discipleship.

For Vietnamese youth, social movements have become unavoidable phenomena that challenge and often unsettle the faith of young Catholics. Developing a personal faith is therefore essential as preparation for maintaining and living out one's faith in new environments, even amid anti-Christian sentiment or persecution. When separated from their faith communities due to living circumstances, young people who are well-grounded in theological and spiritual knowledge can continue to witness to God through their ordinary lives. At present, very few laypersons in Vietnam are engaged in theological education or teaching. Theological fields remain largely the domain of clergy and religious, while the laity, especially the youth, tend to be involved primarily in catechetical

work. Although this situation is partly the result of government restrictions on Catholic education, it also reflects a broader lack of interest in deepening academic and spiritual understanding of God. The proposed model, therefore, seeks to foster love for God not only on emotional and devotional levels but also through rational and academic engagement.

In terms of pastoral care, most Catholic student migrants move to Vietnam's two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which fall under the administration of the country's two archdioceses. These archdioceses possess the most developed pastoral centers, academic institutes, and organizational infrastructures. The Church could expand opportunities for students to enroll in theology and Bible courses offered by institutions such as the Youth School of Faith (YSOF), the Catholic Institute of Vietnam, and the Pastoral Institute of the Archdiocese of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), as well as the Institute of Theology Peter Le Tuy in the Archdiocese of Hanoi.

This initiative aligns with the culture of discipleship—knowing, following, proclaiming, and witnessing Jesus. Moreover, the increasing availability of online platforms from pastoral centers and institutions now allows students to balance their academic studies with theological learning more flexibly and conveniently.

6.3. Following-Abiding

"Abiding" refers to accepting Jesus' words, his revelation as the *Logos* of God, His authorized emissary, and the Revealer. Some defect from Jesus, not because of the opposition from Jesus' opponents or demanding to bear the suffering cross with Jesus as in the Markan discipleship (cf. Mk 8:34), but Jesus' words are the offense themselves (Culpepper 1983, 116). The issue is the acceptance of Jesus' revelation, not the danger of persecution. Examples of the defections include Jesus' sayings of "I AM" (Jn 6:20; 35, 41, 48, 51; cf. 4:26), particularly the eucharistic language in the Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:22-59) (Culpepper 1983, 117). As recorded, many of his "disciples" say: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (Jn 6:60), and many of his "disciples," as a result, returned to their former life and no longer accompanied him (Jn 6:66). Those who remain with Jesus, in contrast to those who left, accept Jesus' words, sayings, "You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). For Culpepper (1983, 116), abiding and abandoning are responses of the hearers, mainly to Jesus' words. Jesus' signs can attract many disciples as a worker of miracles, but his words drive them away. This is the real test of discipleship: "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples" (Jn 8:31).

A personal encounter with Jesus entails abiding in His word, practically expressed through reading and reflecting on Scripture (Weddell 2012, ch. 11). This practice should be actively encouraged within Catholic families and parish groups. Although many Vietnamese Catholic families still maintain a daily prayer

hour, it often consists mainly of reciting the rosary or using formulaic prayers. To deepen this practice, *Lectio Divina* is recommended as a spiritual exercise for family and group prayer. This method fosters a more personal relationship with the Word of God, as it invites participants to read Scripture attentively and share reflections on their lived experiences in light of the verses that inspire them.

The celebration of the Eucharist holds central importance and serves as a vital opportunity for nurturing discipleship—particularly in the context of the Church in Vietnam. As expressed by the Synod on Synodality, "This is why it is important to rediscover how the Sunday Eucharist is formative for Christians: 'The Full extent of our formation is our conformation to Christ'…For many of the faithful, the Sunday Eucharist is their only contact with the Church: ensuring it is celebrated in the best possible manner, with particular regard to the homily and the "active participation" (SC 14) of everyone, is decisive for synodality" (Synod XVI 2024, 49). In light of this, it is recommended that priests' homilies focus more intentionally on Scripture as the primary source for encountering and experiencing God's love in a deeply personal and transformative way. Communion in the Eucharist is the best way to experience personal union or "abiding" in Jesus, as seen in the union between the Vine and the Branches (Jn 15:5). Such an approach would not only strengthen faith formation but also foster a genuine spirit of discipleship among the faithful.

6.4. Witnessing-Love

In John's Gospel, love is never static or self-contained; it is always for the sake of God's mission. The whole movement of the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as the one sent on mission to reveal God's love, not merely to the inner circle, but for the world's sake. Every command, every act of love, especially the command to love one another a preparation and commission for mission. The disciples, bound together by the love of Christ, continue his work by living out and proclaiming this love as the heart of their mission. The more deeply the community abides in Christ's love, the more profoundly it is drawn into the Father's sending, becoming a living witness to the world. Love is, therefore, the very substance of mission—both its source and its goal. Through the love that unites and sends, the world is invited to encounter the divine, life-giving love revealed in Jesus Christ. Mission involves two-fold aspects spontaneously: abiding and going. Abiding in Jesus serves a period of preparation and training for discipleship, and going is an act of mission of love (Gorman 2018, ch. 3). The three characteristics of Johannine discipleship discussed above serve as preparation and training for missionary disciples. The fourth characteristics-witnessing of love is the actualization of going.

Ad intra, the unity and love within the Vietnamese Church, in parishes and faith communities, are a powerful witness for evangelization. The Church's priority is the formation of missionary disciples (abiding) instead of focusing on

outward activities. For candidates to the priesthood and priests, formation and ongoing formation in the human dimension, particularly regarding humility, is highly recommended. It serves as a remedy to modify the hierarchical structure and institutionalism. At the level of dioceses, there needs to be communal reconciliation between clergy and laity that reflects a recognition of past wounds and imbalances in Church relationships. The surrounding content critiques clericalism—a system where the clergy dominate decision-making and marginalize lay voices. The atmosphere of repentance is a dialogue of love and humbleness, not a condemnation, so that the priests can open and accept their faults. Communal repentance is proposed as a healing act to acknowledge past mistakes and abuses of authority; restore trust and unity within the Church; and create space for mutual forgiveness and renewal.

Ad extra, parishes should consider recruiting lay ministers for evangelization. In the early centuries of evangelization in Vietnam, lay catechists—known as *Thầy Giảng của Nhà Đức Chúa Trời*—played a crucial and effective role in spreading the Gospel, collaborating closely with priests, assisting in teaching catechism, and establishing local communities. Today, the Church in Vietnam can still find a similar role and reinvigorate in Apostolate groups, such as *Legio Mariae*, and among catechists. Their usual activities, such as visiting the sick, non-Catholic neighbors, and sharing suffering with others, demonstrate a love and self-sacrifice that are highly valued in Vietnamese village and neighborhood culture. It is noted that the catechist staff in Vietnam is unique and different from other churches. They are totally volunteers and passionate about faith education in the Sunday catechical classes in the parish and proclamation. All their self-sacrifice, self-devotedness, and passion explicitly constitute and demonstrate the personal witnessing of love, being emanated from being loved and personal encounter with Jesus. Thus, priests should encourage them in their apostolate activities with material and spiritual support and expand these activities in other apostolate groups of the parish.

7. Conclusion: Implications for the Vietnamese and Asian Church

This paper has examined the manifestation of collectivist culture in Vietnamese society and its influence on Vietnamese Catholicism. Collectivism contributes many positive aspects to the faith life of Vietnamese Catholics, such as a strong sense of community, active participation in Church activities, and mutual support in nurturing faith. However, the same collectivist tendencies can also lead to certain excesses, such as hierarchicalism, inequality, discrimination, and a sense of superiority, that hinder personal initiative and responsibility within the Church's mission of communion, participation, and evangelization.

With the view of building a synodal Church in Vietnam, there is a pressing need for the process of "inculturation of the Gospel" to purify these negative

elements present in both Church and culture. This study proposes adopting the Johannine model of discipleship as a framework for promoting personal responsibility and individuality within the community of faith. Such an approach fosters the growth of discipleship on intellectual, spiritual, affective, and practical levels, enabling each member of the Church to live out their faith as a personal witness to Christ. Moreover, this model resonates with other ecclesiological approaches proposed for the Churches in Asia, where collectivist cultures similarly shape ecclesial life and practice.

The process of inculturating Johannine discipleship values within Vietnamese culture is undoubtedly complex and demands sustained effort from the entire Church in Vietnam. Promoting a balance between individualist and collectivist ecclesiology remains a relatively new concept and may initially be misunderstood within a Church long influenced by collectivist traditions. This study offers a partial reflection on the issue of collective faith in the Vietnamese Church, drawing on limited data from social and ecclesial surveys conducted primarily in the Archdioceses of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It also acknowledges that the proposed practical applications may vary depending on regional cultural and social contexts across the country.

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The Common Motifs of Popular Religiosity in Pilgrimages to Sabarimala and Malayattoor in Kerala: A Comparative Study on the Commonness of Religiosity in Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial people have undertaken journeys on foot to places deemed holy. Like many other countries, India is a land rich in pilgrimage sites for various religions. This research explores the common motifs of popular religiosity in pilgrimages to Sabarimala and Malayattoor in the Kerala State of India. Those two ancient pilgrimage centers belong to the Hindus and to the Syrian Catholics respectively. Pilgrims on those routes can appreciate its tranquility, as social, cultural and historical riches are set against the backdrop of the Western Ghats of Kerala. The study explains the legends and practices of popular religiosity associated with each center. It is followed by explaining the common motifs of popular religiosity experienced in pilgrimages. This study not only enriches the understanding of popular religiosity in a specific cultural context but also offers valuable insights into the influences of advancements of digital media in pilgrimages. Employing technological tools reduces the impact of pilgrimages on the environment while promoting increased connectivity, safety, security and sustainability. Thus, it provides the pilgrims with holistic pilgrimage experience.

Keywords: *popular religiosity, pilgrimage, Sabarimala, Malayattoor, Ayyappa, Muthappan, legend, myth, digital*

1. Introduction

Every year, millions of people around the world participate in pilgrimages. It is a universal phenomenon of popular religiosity that occurs in nearly every region of the world with nearly every type of people. Popular religiosity is how the common people live their religious beliefs and practices through their particular cultural expressions, often outside the structures of religious institutions. "Popular religiosity refers to a universal experience: there is always a religious dimension in the hearts of people, nations, and their collective expressions. All peoples tend to give expression to their totalizing view of the transcendent, their concept of nature, society, and history through cultic means. Such characteristic syntheses are of major spiritual and human importance."[1]

Davidson and Gitlitz define pilgrimage as a journey to a special place, in which both the journey and the destination have spiritual significance for the journeyer. Important components of a pilgrimage include the intention, the holy site, the journey, and the pilgrim. They illustrate elements for undertaking pilgrimages that may include spiritual renewal, healing, atonement and forgiveness, fulfilment of a vow, reaffirmation of religious or ethnic identity, witnessing a recurring miracle, reenacting a religious event, and test of spiritual or physical strength to undergo a rite of passage.[2] Pilgrims are a group on a journey to a chosen place to ask God or a saint or a deity at that particular place for help in a variety of concerns which the official religions fail to answer.[3] Pilgrimage is extroverted mysticism with external actions carrying inner meanings as mysticism is called an introverted pilgrimage.[4] Bharati argues pilgrimages in India have a strictly defined purpose and scope with a well prescribed procedure, especially in references to times, dates and exact astrologically auspicious moments.[5]

Pilgrims journey together in their newly formed group, strictly following prescribed and mandated pilgrimage activities and requirements. These actions are accorded myriads of meanings that pilgrims construct before, during, and after a pilgrimage. There are series of consistent steps and components commonly practiced in all

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[1] Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines," *Vatican Media,* last modified December 21, 2001: no. 10. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html

[2] Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz*, Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland-An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: 2002), xvii-xxiii.

[3] Kathleen Coyle, "Pilgrimages, Apparitions and Popular Religiosity," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 38, no. 2 (2001): 171-76.

[4] Jean Dalby Clift, Wallace Bruce Clift (*The Archetype of Pilgrimage: Outer Action With Inner Meaning* (Mahwah N.J: Paulist, 1996), 22-28.

[5] Agehananda Bharati, "Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition," *History of Religions* 3, no.1 (1963): 137.

pilgrimages. These practices include commitment to the journey, preparation, the actual travel or journey, preparation to enter the sacred site, the experience at the sacred site, completion of the journey, the return home, and the most challenging demand of continuing to live in the home environment that has remained mostly the same while the person has been transformed and revitalized.[6] The preparatory phase may include abstinence from certain food, drink, and sex; donning special dress to imply as a people set apart from the ordinary, spending more time in prayer, self-reflection, and doing works of penance and almsgiving both individually and communally.

Turner and Turner classify pilgrimages into four types:[7]

- Prototypical pilgrimage: It is established by the founder of a historical religion or their first disciples, or by important adherents of the faith;
- Archaic pilgrimage: It is characterized by evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols resulting in the origin of various folk religions;
- Medieval pilgrimage: This type of pilgrimage is best known in the popular and mythical/literary traditions of the Middle Ages;
- Modern pilgrimage: This type of pilgrimage is marked by devotional practices and personal piety of the adherents.

A pilgrimage is a liminal experience, a threshold, a betwixt. It is a place in-between what was and what will be where the familiar falls apart and new is revealed for powerful transformation of individuals and groups. It is a space where we hold the darkness and light of the messy circumstances, loss, grief, and confusion from where we find a new way forward. The purpose of this paper is to explore the popular religiosity assigned to pilgrimage experiences, to evaluate the similarities between a Christian and a Hindu pilgrimage undertaken in Malayattoor and Sabarimala in Kerala, India, and to elucidate the wave of digital advancements in pilgrimage journeys.

2. Popular Religious Practices in Pilgrimages to Malayattoor

The name 'Malayattoor' is an amalgamation of three words, namely *Mala* (Mountain), *Arr* (River), and *Oore* (Place). So Malayattoor is a meeting place of mountain, river, and land in Ernakulam district in the state of Kerala in South India.

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[6] Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage,* xxiii.

[7] Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 18-19.

2.1. Legends and Myths

The St. Thomas International Shrine Malayattoor is one of the eight international Catholic shrines in the world. It is situated in Kerala, India. Tradition holds St. Thomas the Apostle landed in Crangannore, India in 52 CE. According to the local oral tradition, St. Thomas was greeted by a hostile crowd when he reached Malayattoor on his way to Mylapore. He sought refuge atop a mountain where he spent time in prayer and rest. During this time, he marked a cross on the rock with his finger. This place is now called *Kurisumudi* or the pinnacle of the hill. During his thirst in intense moments of prayer, he struck a rock for water. Miraculously, water burst forth from the rock. This spring water that flows even today is considered miraculous and holy. Pilgrims believe in its healing powers. The imprints of the saint's footprints and knee are found next to the spring. It signifies his time spent in deep prayer.

2.2. The Popular Religious Practices

Even today we could trace out the footprints of St. Thomas and the marks of his knees on the rock in the hilltop. Pilgrims flock to the *Kaalpadam* (footprint) to receive favors and miracle cures from the saint. The *Ponnkurisu* (the golden cross) is the place where St. Thomas is believed to have found solace in prayer and in communion with heavenly Father. A sixteen-foot-long cross was built over the golden cross to protect it from the wild animals. The miraculous pond on the mountain top is the place where St. Thomas quenched his thirst when he was in need of water. The wandering hunters called the *nayadis or the vedan* are believed to have seen this golden cross and gathered there for prayers and offerings. They found a divine light emanating from the hard rock and upon examining the source they found a golden cross. They later discovered the footprints of the great saint and when this extra ordinary piece of news reached the plains, people began to flock the hills of Malayattoor. With increasing numbers of pilgrims, it was the need of the time to build a church and thus in 900 CE, the present St. Thomas Church was built at Malayattoor, on the bank of the River Periyar near Kalady, the birthplace of Sankaracharya, the great Hindu *Advaitic* philosopher and mystic.

The locals began a practice of lighting an oil lamp on top of the mountain at the holy site and whenever the lamp gave in for the wind, a herd of goats came down wailing so that people would climb the mountain to light the lamp again. Pilgrims who climb the mountain even today carry with them sesame seeds to feed the goats, even though there are no more goats. Today sesame seed is offered as a sign of prosperity. At the footstep of the hill, there is the statue of St. Thomas erected in 1938, perched on a rock to protect it from the menacing trunks of wild elephants. The church at the hilltop today stands above the cross that St. Thomas had erected during his days of intense prayer. The church erected

at the top of the mount is believed to have been attacked by the wild elephants. Today this old church is called *Anakutthiyapalli* (the chapel struck by elephants).

It is the source of comfort for the millions who climb the hill with earnest devotion. Even though the principal feast[8] commences eight days after Easter, people start flocking the *kurisumudi* from the beginning of the season of Lent which commences on Ash Monday for the Syrian Catholics. Beginning from Ash Monday, they abstain from eating fish, meat, and eggs. During the Lenten season, pilgrims climb the mountain in reparation for their sins, reciting the Way of the Cross along the way. The pilgrims carry large and heavy wooden crosses, wearing *kavi dhoti* (saffron devotional sarong) *and rudraksha* rosary (the seeds of the Elaeocarpus ganitrus tree).[9] It is a custom among the newlyweds of Kerala to make a pilgrimage to Malayattoor on the first Sunday after Easter that follows their marriage for protection, prosperity and happiness. Some pilgrims climb up and descend the mountain on their knees, some with broomsticks on their heads, some with heavy stones, and some carrying their children high above their shoulders. It is the women who carry the brooms made of large coconut leaves. It signifies wishes to receive long hair which is a criterion for beauty among women in Kerala. Carrying stones symbolize penance. There is a custom among men followed from generation to generation of shaving hair and beard before bathing in the river. Shaving off hair symbolizes leaving the old life force to embrace the new life force as it grows back after the pilgrimage. Interestingly pilgrims climbing up and down the slopes invoke aloud St. Thomas, calling him, according to our customs *Muthappan,* i.e., Patriarch. *"Ponnumkurishumuthappo Ponmalakayattam"* (O Patriarch of the Golden Cross! Climb we shall, this golden hill!) is the chant that pierces the otherwise a silent mountain. It is the chant that comes out from the lips of all pilgrims belonging to different religions who come from all over India climbing the mountain path, forgetting everything and concentrating on God, the Almighty through *Muthappan meaning* the patriarch, a title assigned to St. Thomas. The feast of St. Thomas is known as *Puthunjayar* (New Sunday), celebrated on the Sunday after Easter.

3. Popular Religious Practices in Pilgrimages to Sabarimala

Sabarimala literally means the hills of Sabari. This name derives from "Sabari," a tribal woman who, according to legend, was a devotee of Lord Rama mentioned in the epic tale *Ramayan* and lived in the region of the 18 hills where the temple is located. The Sabarimala temple is located in the Periyar Tiger Reserve Forest in Pathanamthitta district of Kerala.

[8] The feasts in Syro Malabar Rite precedes novena, hosting of the sacred flag three days before the feast, the actual feast and the closing ceremonies follow eight days later.

[9] Both attires are typically Indian to denote asceticism and fasting in preparation of a pilgrimage.

The shrine of Sabarimala is one of the most remote Hindu shrines, situated 914 m above sea level in the forests of Western Ghats in Kerala. Yet it still draws well beyond five million pilgrims each year. The Village of Sabarimala is named after Shabari who did severe penance in order to meet Rama who granted her wish for devotion and faith during her penance. It is one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in South India during the festival season in the months of November, December, and January. Pilgrimage to Sabarimala involves severe austerity, and a trek through the Western Ghats. Sabarimala enshrines Sastha or Ayyappan – Hariharaputran,[10] the son of Shiva and Vishnu-Maya. Sastha is a popular deity in Kerala enshrined in several of its temples. Five temples dedicated to Sastha are of great importance. Kulathuppuzha enshrines Sastha as a child; Aryankavu enshrines him as a young lad; Achan Kovil enshrines him as a householder with his consorts Poorna and Pushkala; Sabarimala enshrines him as his Vanaprasthasramam (retired state); and Ponnambalamedu (the golden shrine) enshrines him as the highest mystic. These five shrines represent the five stages of life as described by the scriptures. *Ponnambalam* is a spot on a hill where the *Makara Jyothi* (a particular star) appears on the day of *Makara Sankranti* (the zodiac movement of the earth's dial around the sun).

3.1. The Legends and Myths

Various legends explain the birth of Ayyappa.[11] One begins with Shiva roaming the mountain kingdoms of the Himalayas. There he sees a lovely maiden and, overcome with desire, he makes passionate love with her. But the maiden is married to another man, a tribal chieftain who vows revenge on the god. The tribal chieftain retires to an ice cave in the high mountains and practices austerities for a thousand years. Through these austerities he gains great psychic powers and goes forth to punish Shiva. From the heights of Mt. Kailash, Shiva sees the tribal chieftain approaching. The chieftain looks like a terrible demon and Shiva, in fear calls on god Vishnu for assistance and protection. Vishnu manifests himself as a beautiful damsel, seduces the demon chieftain, and destroys him. But then Shiva, once again overcome with sexual desire, sees the radiant damsel (who is merely Vishnu in another form) and mates with her. Out of this union comes a baby boy named Ayappa. Embodying the qualities of Vishnu and Shiva, Ayappa is an avatar (divinity in human form) born into the world to battle the demons of the hill tribes of Kerala. Shiva tells the magical child of his dharma-life (a life of service) and leaves him upon the bank of a mountain stream where he is discovered

[10] According to the ancient myths of Kerala, Lord Ayappa was born out of Vishnu and Shiva. Another legend says, Lord Shiva was enamored by the charms of 'Mohini', in which form Vishnu appeared at the time of churning the mythical Ocean of Milk in order to lure the 'asuras' or the demons). Lord Shiva succumbed to the beauty of Mohini and Hariharaputra – son (putran) of Vishnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara) - was born out of the union.

[11] These myths are handed over orally. They have been converted into films and into story in printed form.

by a childless tribal king. Brought up by the king, Ayappa does many miracles, is a great healer and a defeater of demons. After fulfilling the purpose of his incarnation Ayyappa entered the inner sanctum of the ancient temple upon sacred Mt. Sabari and disappeared. During his mythical life, Ayappa kept the company of tigers and leopards. Mystics living in the deep forests surrounding the Sabrimala Mountains have reported seeing Ayappa riding through the jungles upon a majestic tiger.

There is also another popular myth in our tradition. The story goes that Shiva gives a gift an asura (demons) that allows him to merely touch a person on his head, and he will fall dead. The asura then thanks him and wants to try out the boon on Lord Shiva himself. In fear, Shiva runs and calls upon Lord Vishnu for help. Lord Vishnu in the guise of the beautiful maiden Mohini, which literally means "enchantress" or "seductress", approaches the asura. She questions him about why he is chasing Shiva. The asura tells her how he has received this boon and wanted to test it on Shiva himself. Mohini tricks the foolish asura by telling him that the boon was really ineffective and Shiva did not want him to know that. If he wanted, he could test it on himself. The asura placed his hand on his own head, believing her, and he falls dead. Shiva is very grateful towards Vishnu but is enchanted by his female form. Ayyappa was born from this union. They have the child Ayyappa to satisfy the demigods' plea to save them from the torments of the demon Mahishi. Ayyappa is then raised by the King of Panthala, Rajashekharan, who was childless. Right after adopting the child Ayyappa, whom he called Mani Kanda, meaning "one who wears a bell around his neck" (for the child was found wearing a small bell on a chain around his neck that attracted the king's attention who was out on a hunt with his men), the king took the child as his own. When Ayyappa was about to reach age, the queen feared that her own child would lose his right to the throne, so with the minister of the court, she schemed to murder Ayyappa. She faked being ill saying that her stomach was in unbearable pain. The minister bribed the court physician to say that the only remedy would be a female tiger's milk. Ayyappa, willing to do anything for his mother, goes on the dangerous mission alone to get the milk. Instead, he meets Mahishi and slays her. The gods in happiness and joy assume the form of tigers and accompany him back to the palace to give the so-called needed milk remedy. Upon seeing this, the queen confessed her schemes and begs forgiveness from the young prince. Ayyappa forgiving his mother takes the vow of celibacy and leaves the palace to reside on Sabarimala. Women are not allowed to go to the temple, not in fear that Ayyappa might leave the shrine, but that women will desire and fall in love with the beautiful celibate god. They are allowed after they have reached menopausal age.[12]

[12] The myths were compiled from information available at www.ayyappa.ldc.com, www.templenet.com/kerala/sabari.html, www.pta.kerala.gov.in/sabari.html, www.indiavarta.com/religion/sabarimala.html

3.2. The Popular Religious Practices

Before beginning the multi-day walk through the mountain jungles to get to Sabarimala, the pilgrims prepare themselves by wearing the black dhoti and undertaking 41 days of fasting, celibacy, meditation and prayer. Every pilgrim is supposed to observe 41 days of continence or '*brahmacharya*' starting with the *Maladharan* ceremony, when the prospective pilgrim adorns a garland of '*tulsi*' (holy basil) or *'rudraksha'* beads. The pilgrim maintains austerity of mind, body and speech and spends his time visiting temples, praying and attending religious discourses. During the pilgrimage period of mid-November to the end of December, the devotee wears colored clothes like blue, black or ochre, and grows a beard. The pilgrim virtually leads the life of an ascetic, and he is expected to consume only *sattvic* (plant based) food as explained in the Bhagavad-Gita [17:8-10] and abstains from meat, intoxicating drinks, and intoxicants. A significant aspect of the pilgrimage is that all the pilgrims address fellow pilgrims as Ayyappa (the name of the deity himself) irrespective of one's caste or economic status.

The pilgrimage starts with the *Kettunira* ceremony, the filling up of the sacred bundle of two folds (*Irumudi*), conducted either in one's house or in a temple. *Irumudi* is a cloth bag of two compartments, in which the front portion is meant for *puja* (ritual) articles and offerings, and the rear portion for storing the personal requirements for the holy trek. The main offering to the Lord is the ghee-filled coconut and the *irumudi* is balanced on the head while trekking. Once the *Kettunira* ceremony is over, the pilgrim is ready for the pilgrimage. With the relentless chanting of *"Swamiye Saranam Ayappa"* ("Lord Ayappa Our Refuge"), pilgrims reach the holy forest abode of Lord Ayappa atop Mount Sabari. After seeing the deity, many pilgrims will complete a vow called *Shayana Pradikshanam*.[13] This devotional practice is done not only in Sabarimala but also in other temples and churches in Kerala. There are 18 steep steps coated in *panchaloha (*five metal alloy) leading to the deity. It is a sacred place known as *pathinettampadi* (18 steps). In fact, only those devotees carrying an *irumudi* are allowed to enter the temple premises.

Pilgrims reach spiritual ecstasy at the very sight of the 18 golden steps. The devotee, after the hazardous 6 km trek on the forest road from Pamba, breaks a coconut carried in the *irumudi* before stepping on to the *pathinettampadi*. Breaking of the coconut is in itself a spiritual act. The shell of the coconut represents the material body and kernel, the immaterial. The water represents the soul. When the devotee breaks the coconut and steps on to the *pathinettampadi*, he breaks the physical barrier and blends with the Ultimate. A devotee on his 19th pilgrimage carries with him a coconut sapling which he plants near the temple. This again underscores one more magnificent facet of the pilgrimage: The symbiosis between human and nature.

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[13] In the Malayalam language of Kerala, *Shayana Pradakshinam* means "revolution with the body."

There are many theories about the significance of 18 steps in the pilgrimage to Sabarimala. It is believed that the steps represent 18 mountains surrounding the temple. On each step, the deity of the corresponding mountain has been installed. So, when the devotee climbs the 18 steps to reach the sanctum sanctorum, he attains the *punya* (grace) of visiting all 18 hill gods. During the *padipuja* (rituals at the steps), deities of these 18 mountains are propitiated. The significance of each of the 18 steps reflects the inner challenges a devotee must navigate on the path to final enlightenment. The first five steps symbolize the call to transcend the five sensory perceptions. Steps 6 to 13 correspond to inner negativities such as lust, anger, greed, attachment, jealousy, pride, envy, and hypocrisy. The following three steps represent the fundamental qualities of human nature: purity and wisdom (*Satva*), passion and action (*Rajas*), and ignorance and inertia (*Tamas*). To progress toward enlightenment and liberation, a spiritual seeker strives to cultivate *Satva*, balance *Rajas*, and minimize *Tamas*, as every human being embodies these three qualities in varying degrees. The final two steps signify the ultimate call to choose knowledge and enlightenment (*vidhya*) over ignorance and illusion (*avidhya*), leading to divine realization.[14]

The significance of the number 18 can be traced back to the Vedic age. The first Veda (the oldest religious text in Hinduism), believed to be protected by Lord Brahma himself, had 18 chapters. Later, Veda Vyasa divided it to create the four Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharava Veda. Each of these Vedas had 18 chapters. Veda Vyasa also wrote 18 *puranas* (major narratives) and 18 *upa-puranas* (sub-narratives). The *Bhagavad-Gita* has 18 chapters and the Kurukshetra war lasted 18 days. Women, unless they are younger than six or older than sixty are not allowed to come to Sabarimala. It is said that during the pilgrimage periods, no tigers are found along the forest trails leading to Sabarimala. This is explained as resulting from Ayyappan's power over tigers. The secular aspect of the temple is best exemplified by the existence of the *'Vavar Nada'* in honor of a Muslim saint in close proximity to the main temple (Ayyappa Swami Temple) at Sabarimala by the side of Holy *Pathinettampady* (18 steps). The pilgrims also pay homage in the mosque enroute to Erumeli as a part of their pilgrimage. At the end of the journey, the devotee, before entering his house, breaks a coconut, lies prostrate before the family deity, and takes down the garland, thus breaking the continence. The pilgrimage is symbolic of the transformation of the individual self, or in other words, a journey from '*Jivatma*' to *'Paramatma*' (from self to SELF).

[14] Bhakti, Tarani, "The Sacred 18 Steps of Sabarimala: The Pathway to Divine Realization," *DharmikVibes (blog),Feb 23, 2025. https://blog.dharmikvibes.com/p/the-sacred-18-steps-of-sabarimala*

4. Common Motifs of Popular Religiosity in Pilgrimages to Malayattoor and Sabarimala

4.1. Religiosity of the Body

The most common motif of popular religion as the religiosity of the body denotes the hazardous paths undertaken to reach the divine. There is sweat, body odour, aching bones, and blistered feet as the pilgrims trek along the mountainous terrains of Kerala. They experience hunger and thirst as food intake is restricted to simple vegetarian meals and water. *Shayana Pradishanam,* or revolution of the body (a form of worship done by rolling on the ground), walking on the knees, carrying the *irumudi* and heavy wooden crosses, stones on the head, etc., are examples of 'difficulty of access' motif in operation. The underlying principles of these exterior body movements are the expressions of one's own sense of ignorance, unworthiness, and sinfulness to receive the grace one wishes. It means conversion and growth happens when one works hard by leaving the familiar self and the world to the unfamiliar and gruesome. The Jungian expression calls this inner journey of growth and development as "the path of individuation," which is a lifetime journey with difficult tasks. The exterior journey in pilgrimages as a practice of popular religiosity is an expression of the inner journey for encountering the divine to transform the self. Terreault underscored religiosity of body in pilgrimages specifically as "a cluster of performative practices of movement through time and across space, originating and substantiated in the lived flesh of pilgrim bodies-in-the-world."[15]

4.2. Religiosity of the Many

People go on pilgrimages not as individuals but in groups. Pilgrimages are an embodiment of a collective journey the community undertakes in a multigenerational, multi-status, and multi-affiliation society. Sommerfelt emphasizes the transcendence of different boundaries in shared humanity by narrowing the distances between divisions created by social prestige hierarchies and differences of economic classes, kin and non-kin, urban and rural, strangers and family, and between living kin and departed ancestors.[16] The pilgrims to Sabarimala, called *Ayyappas*, wear special clothing, usually black or blue attire, until the pilgrimage is completed. The pilgrims to Malayattoor these days wear *kavi* (saffron) dhotis as their distinct mark. Both are typical ascetical costumes of the Kerala culture. They follow a particular path, or way, in communion with other pilgrims walking the same route. This path is considered sacred. The prayers and rituals are

[15] Sara Terreault, "Introduction: The Body is the Place Where Pilgrimage Happens," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 7, no.1 (2019): 1.

[16] Tone Sommerfelt, "Politics of Shared Humanity: On Hospitality, Equality and the Spiritual in Rural Gambia," *Anthropological Forum* 34, no.1 (2024): 55.

performed collectively. Among the pilgrims, there is a growing awareness of a shared humanity and collective connection with the divine, transcending religious, social, and economic differences.

4.3. Religiosity of Rituals without Priests

There are numerous popular rituals that characterize the pilgrimages. They are carried out in utmost precision and reverence by the pilgrims themselves without a priest compared to general practices of official religions that are priest cantered. The pilgrims in Sabarimala reach out to connect themselves with Lord Ayyappa through *darshan* (to see and to be seen by the deity). Physical connection either by kissing or by touching is the popular religious practice at Malayattoor. Practices such as the revolution of the body (*shayana pradikshanam*) to reach the presence of the deity, circumambulation of the temple, and the veneration of the sacred cross and the statue of St. Thomas are also widely observed. Circumambulation is a unique popular Indian ritual practice with the deeper meaning of symbolically honoring all the corners of the cosmos before approaching the center to revere the deity. It is usually performed three times, symbolizing the Earth's threefold motion: spinning on its axis, orbiting the sun, and moving outward through space with the rest of the solar system. It is practiced barefooted by both the Hindus and the Christians.[17] In the Ayyappa temple, pilgrims ring the bells before entering, as devotees believe the deity is asleep and must be awakened. The ringing also serves as a symbolic announcement of one's arrival, reflecting the desire to enter into direct contact with the divine. Women take the lead in guiding the group through the Way of the Cross, devotional singing, and recitation of the Rosary and other prayer forms. Both pilgrim centers are situated in the high mountains with two great rivers of Kerala, the Pamba and Periyar flowing at its feet. Water from the holy streams in the upper hills is drunk as sacred water. The pilgrims also bathe themselves as a symbol of purification in those rivers. In Indian spiritual culture, rivers are deeply revered as sacred. The pilgrims call upon the names of their deities and saints using local names until they reach their presence on the mountain top. Notably, none of these accompanying rituals require the presence of a priest to fulfil.

4.4. Religiosity of Giving and Receiving

Rodrigues highlights one distinct goal of pilgrimages (*thirthayathras*) in the Indian context as developing the mutuality of horizontal relationship for greater equality and sharing. [18] In Sabarimala and Malayattoor the pilgrims leave

[17] Going barefooted is a sign of respect for the sacredness of the place and asceticism. The common practice before entering churches, temples, mosques and houses is to remove the shoes as a sign of respect for the sacredness of the place.

[18] Edwin Rodrigues, "Pilgrimage in the Jubilee Year 2025," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 89, no. 6 (June 2025): 5-6.

something for the deity. Coconut is the most common offertory in Sabarimala where the pilgrim breaks it at the foot of the sacred 18 steps symbolizing his own self. The broken coconut is later used in the sacrifice (*homa)* where it is thrown into the ritual fire. A strong liking for sweets is a common factor of all Hindu Gods and Ayyappa is no exception. *Appam (a kind of pan cake)* and *aravana* (a *dessert* made of rice, ghee, and sugar) are the *prasadams* (sacred food) of the Lord. In Malayattoor, the pilgrims leave sesame seeds and black pepper as offerings to obtain prosperity. The sacred food is carried back home to be shared with family members and friends who could not join the pilgrimage, allowing everyone to partake, directly or indirectly, in the sacred journey. For Catholic pilgrims, undergoing the Sacrament of Reconciliation and receiving Holy Eucharist on the mountain top chapel is a widely done practice. Through these, along with various acts of penance and rituals, the pilgrims symbolically leave behind their sins.

4.5. Religiosity of Negotiation

Pilgrimage sites are avenues of inherent divergent and pluralist expressions of negotiations with the deity in popular folk styles. Dhali explains the negotiations in pilgrimages are for gaining religious merits and seeking solutions to their mundane everyday problems. Furthermore, visits to folk deities are powerful expressions of socio-cultural identity by subalterns and subordinates of the Indian society who consider the deities as their local heroes who address their immediate needs and safeguard their identity.[19] Underlying motivation for most pilgrimages lies in negotiating with the deity for pardon and for favors such as healing, fertility, prosperity, and happiness. At the heart of many pilgrimages is an endless list of material blessings, often sought in fulfilment of a vow. Many feel that such blessings and miracles are not experienced through the routine observances of prescribed religious practices. For others, especially those wearied by the monotony of daily life, the pilgrimage offers a break from sameness and an opportunity for inner renewal. Among young people accustomed to material comfort, annual pilgrimages have become an almost inevitable practice for personal transformation. Frequently, once a petition has been granted through these negotiations with the deity, pilgrims return to fulfil their promises, offering acts of gratitude. In doing so, the pilgrimage experience deepens their sense of life and makes it profoundly more meaningful.

4.6. Religiosity of Inter-religiousness

Indian society is very inclusive in general where no one and nothing gets lost. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and the minority groups of Jews and Sikhs coexist in Kerala. Temples, mosques, and churches stand side by side in Kerala with no

[19] Rajshree Dhali, "Perspectives on Pilgrimage to Folk Deities," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 8, no.5 (2020): 25.

communal fights and tensions. During the seasons of pilgrimages everyone helps the pilgrims who usually travel barefooted irrespective of their religious identities. They are held in high respect as sacred people on a holy journey. Gupta brings attention to these shared cultural, religious and economic underpinnings of pilgrimages in India with profound impacts on community narratives and lives that foster a spirit of inclusivity, interfaith-dialogue and community engagement.[20] Opposite from the main temple complex in Sabarimala, there is a smaller temple for the Muslim saint called Wavar, who is a friend of Lord Ayyapa. Signifying religious tolerance and harmony of the olden days, the devotees pay obeisance to Lord Wavar, on their way to the main temple. The Catholic pilgrims traveling to Malayattoor church often visit the town of Kalady, the birthplace of Shankaracharya, a world-renowned Hindu mystic philosopher who propounded the *Adviata* School of Philosophy. On their journey, pilgrims show respect and reverence for all holy places, regardless of religious differences. It is common, for instance, to see Hindu pilgrims enroute to Sabarimala dropping coins into the treasury boxes of churches or lighting candles before crucifixes. In doing so, the pilgrims actively construct a pluralist community of interdependence, honoring the sacredness of one another's right to be different—a respect that fosters greater collaboration. In this way, popular religiosity expressed through pilgrimage becomes a positive and creative effort by ordinary people toward mutual peaceful coexistence at the interreligious level. At the heart of pilgrimages and processions lies the building of inclusive, interreligious community.

4.7. Religiosity of Celebration

The pilgrimage season is a time of vibrant celebration, where people of all religions and walks of life come together in shared sacredness. Rogério and Da Silva highlight pilgrimages as religious mega-events of celebrations that generate complementary influences between pilgrimage and tourism, resulting in the promotion and production of fluid boundaries of celebrations of post-modern popular culture.[21] The crowded streets, bustling markets, inexpensive food stalls, and colorful displays of indigenous merchandise form an inseparable backdrop to the spirituality of popular religion. The resonant beat of the *chenda melam* (traditional group drumming) instantly awakens the festive spirit intrinsic to pilgrimage. Played by multicultural and interreligious ensembles, these traditional folk percussion instruments embody the communal rhythm of celebration, inviting pilgrims to feel and absorb the collective joy that accompanies the feast.

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[20] Vinay Gupta, "Pilgrimage Perspectives: Exploring the Realm of Religious Tourism In India, *Journal of the Institute of Oriental Studies* 3*,* no. 3 (2025): 29-30.

[21] José Rogério Lopes and André Luiz da Silva, "Religious Mega-Events and Their Assemblages in Devotional Pilgrimages: The Case of Círio de Nazaré in Belém, Pará State, Brazil," *Journal of Global Catholicism* 5, no.2, Article 5 (2021): 90-92.

4.8. Religiosity of Intuition

Popular religiosity is always ruled by a flow state of intuition rather than rational logic. It is a place of epiphanies and realizations. Kochappilly argues that pilgrimage is fundamentally an epiphany of the life and nature of faith, and basically a movement of the people, a progression of inner current and undercurrent of the belief-system of a particular religion.[22] The prayers and actions performed are feeling-based and affective with a deep sense of God. It may not be always in consonance with the fixed rubrics and rituals of an institutional religion. In its content and expression, it is very different from the spiritual activities of those who are initiated more thoroughly, such as the clergy and *brahmanic* priests. The need-based prayers are murmured spontaneously in the presence of the deity. They are often uttered in the frame of mind of one who does it. It is known to him/her alone. One's real-life situations are the raw materials for prayer said with great spontaneity and improvisation. The faithful seek God's response to their concrete human needs for protection, healing, blessings, and grace—and approach the divine through various rites, symbols, and particular devotions. Sala highlights that the content of such prayers is influenced by context holding the creative dimension of expressing something one that has never been said before as such prayers emanate from the heart and are not stored in the head. Those prayers are often said in varying voice pitch and modulation with accompanying gestures, thus becoming a mixture of persuasion and command.[23]

4.9. Religiosity of Cultural Ethos

Popular religiosity expressed in pilgrimages is an expression of the cultural ethos of people of Kerala. The practices of popular religiosity contain the indigenous cultural patterns of Kerala as a state. During worship most pilgrims squat on the floor, touch the flames of holy fire with their palms, and touch the statues and sacred places with their palms and bring the palms to their foreheads and hearts. In diverse ways, it carries the marks of the ascetical and spiritual traditions of Indian society. This cultural energy is expressed in their power to be somebody. In Indian society where the status of people is graded in caste systems, embracing Christianity and joining Christian movements and pilgrimages always provide a different higher ranking social identity. Unlike other states of India, Kerala has no rigid caste system. Popular religiosity in pilgrimages is an expression of the embodiment of faith in the cultural traits of Kerala, which while very diverse, contain some basic commonalities. Being an agrarian state, its closeness to the earth is expressed in the mountainous character of the pilgrim sites with

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[22] Paulachan Kochappilly, "Pilgrimage: Phenomenon Of Passage," *Journal of Dharma* 3, no. 3 (2006): 321.

[23] Sala M. Bonaventure, "The Performative Aspect of Spontaneous Prayers in Cameroon: A Study in Evasive Media in Interactions," *British Journal of English Linguistics* 10, no. 2, (2022): 2.

sacred rivers at its foothills. The offerings are agricultural products such as coconuts, black pepper, sesame seeds, ghee, native bananas, etc. In one way or the other, attention and respect is paid to the five elements—water, air, fire, earth, and ether—in various rituals and worship forms undertaken during a pilgrimage. Kerala with its 100 percent literacy level has a large number of educated youths facing high unemployment and records the highest suicide rate in India.[24] The state has no major industries. The strict labor laws put forward by the successive communist governments cause investors to shy away. This cultural energy is seen in the collective identification and solidarity with one another in the footsteps of the pilgrim path hoping for a better future. In pilgrimages, cosmic elements and the human species become one creative inter-related reality as opposed to the institutionalized religious practices, which are often sterile. The popular religious practices performed are the root cultural paradigms unique to Kerala culture.

4.10. Religiosity of Self-realization for Integral Transformation

The phrase inscribed atop of the Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Swamy Temple '*Tatvamasi*' encapsulates the essence of pilgrimage to Sabarimala. Meaning "You are That," it is the self-realization of recognizing the divine within and the unity between the individual soul and the universal spirit. Here one will realize that what you seek is seeking you. This impels a person to recognize the divine in others and the universe by practicing compassion and justice. Prayers and rituals help to internalize its meaning in order to realize the divine potential in everyone beyond all human limitations.

Pilgrimage to Malayattoor is a call to realize the divine within. Jesus insisted that Thomas touch his wounds, after which Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). "Look deep into the wound of a wounded person and confess, *my lord and my God! this* is Christian contemplation. Get involved in the initiatives of integral liberation and feel, *God is with us*- this is Christian commitment."[25] Pope Francis elaborates on the positive impact of popular piety on society as a whole as an authentic faith is not a private affair, but committed to promoting "human development, social progress and care for creation." He emphasizes that popular piety fosters "constructive citizenship" among Christians, enabling collaboration with secular, civil, and political institutions "in the service of each person, beginning with the least among us, for an integral human growth and the care of the environment;"[26] (It was Saint Paul VI who changed the name in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* from "religiosity" to popular "piety").

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[24] Kerala State Youth Commission, *Youth Mental Health: A Study on Suicides* (KSYC Report, 2025), 43-52.

[25] Sebastian Painadath, *The Spiritual Journey* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 97.

[26] Francis, "La Religiosite Populaire En Mediterrainee," *Vatican Media,* last modified December 15, 2024: para. 11.
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241215-ajaccio-congresso.html

4.11. Religiosity of Hope

A pilgrimage is a journey of hope in our moments of greatest need, amidst the messy, painful, and difficult situations of life. Even when hope seems absent, we long for it, despite not knowing what the future may bring. Pilgrimage opens a seeker to authentic and unexpected encounters with the Divine, experientially offering glimpses of hope. In the Catholic Church, the 2025 Jubilee is centered on the theme "Pilgrims of Hope." Pope Francis writes that setting out on a journey in pilgrimage is traditionally associated with our human quest for meaning in life, rediscovering the value of silence, effort, and simplicity. It encourages and sustains hope as a constant companion that guides our steps toward the goal of encountering the Lord Jesus.[27]

5. Digital Influence in Pilgrimages

In recent times, traditional pilgrimages are evolving into spiritual tourism, also known as religious tourism, sacred tourism, or faith tourism. Pilgrimage is a subset of religious tourism that specifically involves journeys to sites of religious significance within a particular faith tradition. On the other hand, spiritual tourism goes beyond religious contexts, incorporating educational tours of different religious sites, participation in meditation-yoga retreats, wellness retreats, and ancient healing practices and alternative therapies such as Ayurveda. Digital platforms in the pilgrimage centres are significantly providing pilgrims with easy access to essential information like accessibility, pilgrimage-related tasks, accommodation, mode of transport for safer journeys, pricing, weather and crowd management, and giving physically-challenged pilgrims access to holy places through virtual spiritual experiences. In India, many pilgrimage sites integrate various digital tools such as AI, blockchain, drones, VR, and digital communication channels for handling complex event management logistics, pilgrim satisfaction, security and safety. The following section demonstrates how technology is utilized to enhance pilgrimage experiences, and to improve related services and practices.

5.1. Selection of Pilgrimage Destinations

Information and Communication Technologies are increasingly used in the pre-travel phases to access necessary information on pilgrimage sites from the narratives of pilgrimage bloggers. This includes reviews, recommendations, booking, videos, and photos. For example, the Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Swamy Temple has introduced Virtual-Q system to enhance convenience and safety

[27] Francis, "Spes non Confundit**,** Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025," *Vatican Media,* last modified May 9, 2024: no. 5, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html

through effective crowd management, particularly during peak seasons. Pilgrims can book worship slots online, with a daily capacity of 70,000, which requires mobile number verification and government-issued ID. Additional benefits include accident insurance and free tickets for sacred food (*prasadam*).[28]

5.2. Emergence of the Virtual Pilgrimage Experience

The Virtual Pilgrimage experience is an alternative for those with mobility issues, for those with travel restrictions, or those who are just looking for a different way to connect with the sacred. Programs include live streaming of religious ceremonies, 360-degree virtual tours and the ability to engage in online spiritual practices. YouTube channels educate and engage seekers unlocking new dimensions of exploring virtual pilgrimages. Tran and Davies propose a hybrid authenticity framework which emphasizes the consumer-congregants' development of perceived authenticity of virtual pilgrimage as it provides an inclusive and transformative experience than a bodily pilgrimage journey for those experiencing health issues, people on the margins such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, etc. This approach views virtual pilgrimages as part of a broader social and cultural transformation characterized by postmodernity.[29]

5.3. Pilgrimage Promotion and Marketing

Various stakeholders utilize digital platforms such as websites and mobile applications to promote pilgrimages. It promotes online marketing and distribution of religious products and services to the global community. It significantly enhances pilgrim experiences by providing detailed information on event schedules, bookings for special rituals, accommodation, food and transportation options, medical facilities, insights into nearby tourist attractions, and online-digital banking such as Google Pay and Quick Response (QR) codes. Pilgrims can easily access online donation facilities such as 'e-kanikka', (an electronic hundi or money transfer option). Platforms such as Tripadvisor, Google Maps, GPS, and site-specific maps facilitate travel. A recent study on the impact of social media on spiritual tourism in promoting the economic development of temples in the Indian context reported that social media significantly boosts pilgrimage-based spiritual tourism. The most influential portals were Instagram (20.3%), Facebook (19.8%), television programs (11.2%), Moj (7.8%), YouTube (7.5%), Josh (6.1%),

[28] KPMG, "Faith and flow Navigating crowds in India's sacred spaces," *KPMG. Make the Difference* (August 2025): 12.

[29] Mai Khanh Tran and Andrew Davies, "The Hybrid Authenticity of Virtual Pilgrimage," *Marketing Theory* 25, no. 1 (2025): 143-144.

Snapchat (5.6%), ShareChat (5.1%), MX TakaTak (3.7%), Chingari (4.5%), and Twitter (3.5%).[30]

5.4. Digital Community of Like-minded People

Social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, JoinMyTrip, and Facebook allow like-minded individuals to connect and share their experiences and spiritual insights. These platforms have become popular channels for pilgrims today to connect with like-minded individuals, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z to build virtual communities. Smartphone apps such as Google Translate and Duolingo help pilgrims to overcome language barriers. Manikandan and Chauhan posit that communal broadcasting apps prioritize gathering like-minded devotees. Among them, 40.6% preferred package-based trips, 20.3% preferred trips without packages, 27% preferred group trips with friends, relatives, or family, and 12% preferred independent trips only.[31]

5.5. Installing Crowd Management Apps

The widespread use of CCTV and drone technology surveillance systems is two safety- and security-related tools widely used at pilgrimage centers, enhancing overall monitoring and security of wildlife, people, and property. The WhatsApp-based chatbox named 'Swami,' a multilingual AI, helps provide details on crowd status, weather, medical help, food, bookings, rates, emergency assistance, bus schedules, and more, ensuring smooth crowd flow during festive days at Sabarimala. A recent research study on the largest religious gathering on earth, known as Maha Kumbh 2025, explored how digital integration of AI, drones, blockchain, and immersive media can balance technology and tradition to promote safety, engagement, and efficiency. It employed 2,760 AI cameras with 98% accuracy in facial recognition for improved safety; its AI chatbot handled over 100,000 queries daily; its portal, known as the Maha Kumbh 2025 app, had 5 million users; a cybersecurity team consisting of 56 experts was deployed; drones were employed for safety; Facebook and Instagram drove 50% of digital engagement; YouTube live attracted over 10 million views; and X (Twitter) contributed 30%, highlighting the impact of hashtag campaigns. For real-time updates, WhatsApp and Telegram groups accounted for 10%. Therefore, Maha Kumbh 2025 has set a benchmark for future religious festivals and pilgrimages in India and worldwide.[32]

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[30] P. Manikandan and Karishma Chauhan, "Impact of Social Media on Spiritual Tourism in Promoting Economic Development of Temples from the Indian Context," *The Bioscan, An International Quarterly Journal of Life Sciences* 20, no.1 (2025): 373.

[31] Manikandan and Chauhan, "The Impact of Social Media," 376-377.

[32] Aditya Krishnan and Swati Agrawal, "Digital Transformation of Religious Events," *Journal of Marketing & Social Research* 2, no. 2 (2025): 536 -538.

5.6. Introduction of Extended reality (XR)Technology Apps

Digital technologies keep evolving, and new ones continue to emerge. Many pilgrimage centers are adopting both Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies. Virtual Reality (VR) is a fully immersive digital environment created with computer-generated imagery and sensory feedback, whereas Augmented Reality (AR) overlays digital elements onto the real physical world. Mixed Reality (MR) is beginning to take shape, providing a view of the real physical world with digital overlays where physical and digital elements can interact. All these technologies are part of an open Extended Reality (XR) continuum[33] that is evolving at a rapid pace.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to explore the commonalities of religiosity in pilgrimage experiences between a Christian and a Hindu pilgrimage undertaken in Malayattoor and Sabarimala in Kerala, India, and to illustrate the incorporation of information technology advancements in pilgrimage journeys and sites. By understanding the legends and myths, as well as the popular religious practices that impact the inner life of pilgrims and the emergence of social media platforms, we gain a deeper appreciation for the role that popular religiosity in pilgrimages has continued to play throughout history. Thus, pilgrimage is not only a spiritual journey of self-discovery and personal transformation but also a cultural phenomenon that connects and forms individuals and communities, fostering greater purpose and meaning in life across religious beliefs and practices.

However, due to the difficulty in accessing adequate validated resources, the dissimilarities between the two respective pilgrimages are not sufficiently explored in this study. For consolidation, further research on these differences would be worthwhile, as it could contribute to the identification and clarification of both commonalities and dissimilarities. In the future, another area for exploration would be the alignment of in-person and virtual worlds of pilgrimage as expressions of popular religiosity, each complementing and nurturing the other. A meaningful way forward is to pursue this path—both physical and virtual—in interconnectedness and interrelatedness rather than in isolation. In the long run, the digital conceptualization of the metaverse[34] is on the near horizon. The metaverse blends our physical and digital worlds by integrating cutting-edge technologies to deliver real-time, genuine sensory experiences of sight, smell, touch, and even mind, enabling closer real-world interactions. In this new digital

[33] Laia Tremosa, "Beyond AR vs. VR: What is the Difference between AR vs. MR vs. VR vs. XR?" *Interaction Design Foundation, CC BY-SA 4.0.* Last modified March 24, 2025.

[34] "Know, now edition 3 - Metaverse special." Nokia.com, last modified March 10, 2025, https://onestore.nokia.com/asset/212271

metaverse, which recreates the real world, pilgrims can immerse themselves by moving through and participating in any pilgrimage center across continents, experiencing hyper-realistic spiritual encounters from the comfort of their own living spaces.

In both pilgrimage centers, despite various technological advancements, challenges such as structural limitations, absence of structured zoning for rest and recuperation, health and hygiene challenges, inadequate safety and crowd management measures, lack of training in multilingual interactions, infrastructure and logistical constraints, increased environmental impact, and multiple gaps in coordination measures persist. Thus, this paper presented narrative descriptions of two examples of popular religiosity: that of Malayattoor and Sabarimala, examining the common motifs of popular religiosity. It highlighted the perspective and understanding of the vast culture and tradition of religiosity in Kerala where pilgrimages remain an integral part of its culture and many religions.

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Makaammo'n ti Apo: Exploring a Facet of Ilokano Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

Makaamo'n ti Apo is best defined as the Ilokano equivalent of the Filipino-Tagalog saying "bahala na". While this is seen in a similar lens, makaamo'n ti Apo provides a glimpse of how Ilokanos, another major ethno-linguistic group in the Philippines, have faith in God and also in how they manifest their spirituality. This study looks into the experiences of Ilokanos in relation to the divine through their knowledge and usage of the said statement and the results would open to a discourse on Ilokano culture and spirituality. This study aims to explicate how Ilokanos manifest makaamo'n ti Apo as a facet of their spirituality. It utilizes a qualitative method with a hermeneutical phenomenological design, which is targeted at the data collected through interviews among Ilokano educators in the secondary and tertiary levels. The results of the study provide the circumstances in which Ilokanos use the statement. It is often used during checkmate situations, decision-making uncertainties, and pacifist conflict settlements. The reasons/source of their usage are the following: Family and cultural upbringing, faith expression, and automatic response mechanism. Key themes also surfaced as to

how makammo'n ti Apo manifests as a pertinent part of the participants' spirituality. Makaaammo'n ti Apo manifests as spirituality among the Ilokanos with their acknowledgement of human limitations, amplified confidence in living, and recognition of the divine.

Keywords: *Amianan, Ilokano identity, Filipino theology*, *ordinary theology, religiosity*

1. Introduction

Uncertainties elicit different responses, such as coping mechanisms. When individuals face uncertainty and risk, they tend to manifest proactive attitudes. Even in the most dire situations, individuals step forward rather than give up (Pe-pua et al. 2000, p. 49). While humanity's highly evolved sense of self helps cope with the world's uncertainties (Landau et al. 2010, 195), others accede to other options. Uncertainty management perspective believes that cultural worldviews may provide a means to cope with personal uncertainty (Van den Bos 2009, 197-217). Cultural perspectives have been shown to benefit individuals who subscribe to them, and vice versa, by reinforcing the norms and values associated with them (Van den Bos, 2009, 197). The old-age practice of subscribing to cultural perspectives and traditions, particularly in cases of dealing with life uncertainties and setbacks, is still embraced to deal with contemporary problems despite the availability of scientific and professional solutions. Cultural values, traditions, and practices hold relevance regardless of time, even though they can be traced back to antiquity.

Furthermore, the tendency to draw out cultural solutions to problems can be observed in people whose primary worldview emanates from their culture, like people from ethnolinguistic groups and indigenous peoples. For example, the ethnolinguistic group Kankanaeys in the Philippines utilized *"Tengaw"*[1] successfully to adapt to the different uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cadingpal 2021, 287-89). Also, the Kankanaeys elevated their cultural expression *"Kasiyana"*[2] into a form of religious communication, which significantly played an essential role in assisting the sick experiencing hopelessness, doubts, and uncertainties (Cadingpal 2024, 444-69). Other ethnolinguistic groups also have different ways of dealing with the challenges of the contemporary era.

[1] "Tengaw" is a traditional practice among the Kankanaeys staying at home in observance of a ritual ongoing in the community. Such practice is usually prescribed by the elders. Non-observance of such will make one despicable.

[2] "Kasiyana" is a Kankanaey term expressing hopefulness that everything will be alright after going through adversities.

Therefore, there is no difficulty establishing that ethnolinguistic groups' contemporary spirituality is shaped by their culture. The worldviews ingrained in the culture shape one's spirituality. Spirituality, in turn, shapes human consciousness and behavior (Ubale 2015, 1-2). However, it is important to note that culture is not the only defining and shaping factor of spirituality.

Culture, spirituality, and religion are deeply intertwined (Platovnjak 2017, 117). Therefore, religion is also a significant shaping factor of spirituality. Religion or participation in religious activities shapes identities and, eventually, spirituality (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Therefore, the study of spirituality, its shaping factors, and the circumstances that come with it is a search for its constant change, particularly those brought about by the changing landscape of culture, relationship dynamics, and power. Religion and culture are not the only factors shaping spirituality. It would be inimical to claim those are the only shaping factors. However, they are the highlighted factors in this introduction for consistency with the explored idea of *makaammo'n ti Apo* as a form of spirituality among the Ilokanos, shaped by the fusion of Ilokano culture and the Christian religion. Therefore, the objective of this study is to make explicit how *makaammo'n ti Apo* constitutes a form of Ilokano spirituality.

1.1. A Glimpse of the Ilokanos and Their Spirituality

Ilokanos are found in the northern part of the Philippines and are considered one of the major cultural groups in the Philippines. They are praised for their resourcefulness and industriousness, probably due to their location and extreme weather patterns (Pacris 2024). Pacris added that Ilokanos are thrifty but misunderstood as tightwads (Pacris 2024). Furthermore, aside from the mentioned thrifty trait, the Ilokanos are also religious (Tagay and Ballesteros 2016, 27-40). The Ilokanos believe that the universe is a creation of God (Tagay and Ballesteros 2016, 29). Like any other cultural group, they take pride in their cultural heritage. Tagay and Ballesteros also mentioned that they have a rich cultural heritage, as shown in the festivities in each town or municipality to honor their patron saints (Tagay and Ballesteros 2016, 30).

The richness of the Ilokano cultural heritage is observed to have a deep intertwinement with religiosity and spirituality. In particular, they also believe in "atang," which has been studied to be compatible with the Catholic doctrine on Communication of Saints (Corpuz 2020, 113-126). Such practice is cultural and religious by nature. The cultural heritage of the Ilokanos traces a profound relevance to Christianity, which can be traced back to the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. Also, the procession during Holy Week is practiced by the Ilokanos (Queddeng et al. 2021). It is a culturally assimilated practice from the Spanish influence of practicing Christianity. In the present, the Ilokanos, with the deep entanglement of their culture and religiosity, developed expressions that eventually turned into a mentality shaping their spirituality and worldviews. *Makaammo'n*

ti Apo is one of such. In this study, the researchers will make explicit the relationships between *makaammo'n ti Apo* and spirituality. The limitations in the availability of published works about Ilokano spirituality serve as an inspiration for the conduct of the study. Despite the many claims of the Ilokano's religiosity and spirituality in the cited literature, there is a need to provide evidence. While some Ilokano claims of religiosity can be shared with other Filipino ethnolinguistic groups like the Tagalogs, literature in this area is still limited. Therefore, conducting the study is necessary to start discourses on Ilokano religiosity and spirituality.

1.2. Critical Dialogue between Ilokano Spirituality and Western Notions of Spirituality

Ilokano spirituality is syncretic in nature, which is an integration of Roman Catholicism and the folk spirituality (Farinas 2024). This is a product of the Christianization of the Ilokandia, and the Ilokanos integrated Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, into their beliefs. The Ilokanos, with their animistic belief system, believe that everything in nature has spirits and it is interrelated to the *anitos,* soul, afterlife, and the transcendent *Apo* (Agcaoili 2001, 167-168). The interrelationality of the different spirits, with the transcendent *Apo,* with humanity, and the natural environment, is one of the defining characteristics of Ilokano and other Asian spiritualities. In contrast, the Western notion of spirituality leads to a dichotomized and separated view of spirituality, which is separated from religion/religiosity. The reason behind this dichotomy is explained by the need of "believers," which is connoted by spirituality, which reflects individualism, liberation, and maturity, whilst "belongingness", as connoted by religion, portrays institution, constraint, and even childishness (Overstreet 2010). Western culture plays a big factor contributing to the dichotomy in religion and spirituality, while in the East, religion and spirituality are intertwined with each other, and this affects every facet of human life.

Rooting from this distinction, it follows that Ilokano spirituality is communal-holistic-ecological, and Western spirituality is individual-psychological. The Ilokanos are grounded with the concept of *nakem,* which speaks of their totality/personhood (Alterado 2021). Since *nakem* talks of the totality and for it being non-dualistic, it shows that an Ilokano is connected to everything, including the transcendent *Apo* or God. In addition, one's *nakem* shapes how an Ilokano is thoughtful of his relationship and actions with people and surroundings, for they believe that deities are around with them and can intervene in humanity, which can affect the person (Alterado et al. 2023). This is evident when an Ilokano strives to do good to oneself, others, and the environment, for it resonates the *kinaimbag ti nakem* (goodwill) that one has. Western spirituality revolves around logos or reason, which can be understood as the divine reason/intelligence that organizes the cosmos based on God's will and/or the incarnation of Christ

himself. *Logos* sets a dualism from the human world, for this is transcendent, and from God's mind, which focuses on the salvation of man through the mediation of Jesus Christ.[3] The transcendent characteristic of the *logos* means that it is external to man, and it is only revealed and understood through revelation and faith. Therefore, from the contrast of the Ilokano spirituality and Western spirituality, it can be said that both differ in context, manifestations, and applications to the human person. Despite the difference, both of them strive towards a good life.

1.3. Acquainting with *Makaammo'n ti Apo*

Cultural perspectives are valid sources of theological reflections. One relevant example is how the *Kasiyana* served as a source of reflection among the Kankanaeys, an ethnolinguistic group from Northern Luzon in the Philippines (Cadingpal 2024, 444-69). Ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines take pride in their culturally created terms emanating from centuries of tradition and practices, which eventually hold significant value and relevance. Among the Ilokanos,*makaammo ti Apo* exhibits immense spiritual relevance due to their subscription to it in times of uncertainty, danger, and fear.

Makaammo'n ti Apo, translated as "God will take care of it," shares similarities with the Filipino *"Bahala Na."* Both terms refer to surrendering to a divine being, whatever circumstances one is going through. The mindset or expression can be perceived as either fatalistic or not, depending on the individual subscribing to it. *"Bahala na"* tends to be used positively, believing in God rather than destiny (Hong 2020, 135). However, one can also view the portrayed mentality in a different light. Other people use it as a total surrender of everything to God; hence, a display of a fatalistic attitude (Gripaldo 2005, 203-20). Therefore, *Bahala na* can be used responsibly and irresponsibly depending on the person manifesting it. The same goes for *makaammo'n ti Apo*—it can be used responsibly and irresponsibly. However, despite the choices for its usage, *makaammo'n ti Apo* evidences a mentality affecting and shaping the Ilokano spirituality. Even though *makammo'n ti Apo* seems to be a phrase, its utterance and the Ilokanos' subscription to it radiates a deep significance of the value of religion and culture shaping the Ilokano spirituality, which eventually affects the way they live their lives. This expression can be found in almost every aspect of the Ilokano way of life. Its pervasive characteristic and potential in the life of the Ilokanos make it a significant, relevant, and sufficient ground for surfacing a facet of Ilokano spirituality.

1.4. Research Questions

The study will be fulfilled by answering the specific questions below. The answers to the questions will ensure the fulfillment of the study's primary

[3] See John 1:14.

objective—to make explicit how the *makaammo'n ti Apo* manifests a facet of Ilokano spirituality.

1. What instances elicit the Ilokano professional's subscription to the *makaamo'n ti Apo* mentality?
2. Why is *makaammo'n ti Apo* a preferred mentality or expression when faced with these instances?
3. How is *makaammon ti Apo* a manifestation of Ilokano spirituality?

2. Methodology

The study used a qualitative method and a Hermeneutical Phenomenological Design. The hermeneutical phenomenological design best fits the study since it intends not only to understand the *makaammo'n ti Apo* manifestation but also to critically evaluate how the manifestation is a form of spirituality among the Ilokanos. Hermeneutical phenomenology is also a method of interpretive phenomenology (Sloan and Bowe 2014, 1291). The study applied reading and re-reading transcript texts from participants as a significant activity in hermeneutical phenomenology (Sloan and Bowe 2014, 1292). The critical reading ensures the derivation and interpretation of the phenomenon.

The participants of the study are chosen through the following inclusion/exclusion criteria: a) must be Ilokano from the Ilocos Region (Region 1) of the Philippines, b) currently working professional educators in college or senior high school, c) currently living in an Ilokano community, d) proficient with the Ilokano language, e) practicing Christian, and f) have been using of familiar with the statement *makaammo'n ti Apo*. The criteria for selecting participants are meant to ensure that they are Ilokanos and have been manifesting *makaammo'n ti Apo* proficiently using the Ilokano language. The researchers also chose the group of currently employed professionals since they are one of the groups experiencing the complexity and uncertainties of life, and the manifestation of the studied expression and mentality (*makaammo'n ti Apo*) is common. The participants were also asked if they were practicing Christians, since referring to *"Apo"* commonly refers to the Christian God, which historically is due to the influence of Christianity on the Ilokano culture. The researchers gathered eight Ilokano professionals as participants for the study. The number of participants is based on the conceptual saturation of data. Data saturation occurs when no new themes appear in the data (Saunders et al. 2018, 1894). After the interview and transcription of the interview from the eighth participant, it was observed that the same themes were recurrent.

The study gathered the data from the participants through one-on-one in-person interviews with open-ended questions. Every interview is immediately

transcribed to look into the codes and themes for possible saturation. When the researchers validated the occurrence of data saturation, the transcription underwent the procedures of Hermeneutical Phenomenological Analysis by Lindseth and Norberg (2004, 145-53). It followed the steps of Naive Reading, Structural Analysis, and Comprehensive Understanding. The researchers could process the data and arrive at codes and themes by following the process. The findings were then presented, and the topic will be discussed thematically in the next section of the paper. In the thematic presentation of the results and their discussion, the researchers used the code P1 to refer to Participant 1, P2 to refer to Participant 2, and so on. Such is in the interest of the participant's privacy.

The researchers employed the highest ethical standards in ensuring data integrity, participants' protection of dignity and identity, and other aspects and processes for the project's accomplishment. We also adhered to Creswell's (2013) ethical standards for qualitative inquiry. An informed consent form was also used to ensure the voluntary participation of participants with full knowledge of what they are engaging with.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings are thematized based on the themes created by the data. Afterward, a thorough discussion of each theme is provided regarding its significance to the Ilokano and its implications for one's way of life.

3.1. *Makaammo'n ti Apo* manifesting Circumstances

The manifestation of *makaammo'n ti Apo* does not come in a form like any other street expression. With the attachment of "*Apo*" in the expression of *makaammo'n ti Apo* comes a different form of valuing. The Ilokano participants have chosen specific manifestation scenarios, as evidenced by the themes below.

3.1.1. Checkmate situations

The first manifestation of *makaammo'n ti Apo* is when an Ilokano faces a "checkmate situation." Such a situation prompts the difficulty of continuing or accomplishing something due to exhaustion, hopelessness, and the futility of circumstances. The responses of the participants showing this circumstance are as follows:

> *I use it to surrender my difficulty to God when all human efforts are in vain (P2). ... Circumstances that you are about to surrender or give up something… you say makaammo'n ti Apo." Those things that I cannot do, those that have deadlines. I would say makaammo'n ti Apo. It depends on the futile circumstances* ***(P4)***.

The responses portray struggles that are irresolvable or futile. Lagmay (1993, 32) mentioned that the usage of *Bahala na* is evoked in moments of uncertainty, struggles, or suffering. His statement resonates with the participants' experiences, highlighting experiences of desperation, limitation, and incomprehensibility. In connection with their statements, Ilokanos are known to be industrious and hard-working. Their industriousness and seriousness of work are rooted in the Ilokanos' lack of resources based on their geography, hence being *kuripot* (Reference 2015). Despite their industriousness, the participants acknowledge that there are limits to their hard work, thus resorting to their belief that God is still there to guide whatever checkmate situations they face. Alongside that, they are aware of the transcendental capability of God, which surpasses all human capability. Supporting this claim, **P8** mentioned that one utters *makaammo'n ti apo* when one cannot provide any solutions to their problem.

Given these experiences, unresolved dread is inevitable. Dread comes in many forms, but a certain thing about it is the feeling of anguish one might experience, like the loss of a loved one, uncontrollable circumstances, and sorrowful moments in general, as the participants stated:

> *Sometimes, I use it when I am going through sorrowful moments, and I cannot fully express my emotions and feelings. I rest it to God. Anyway, God is there* ***(P1)****. Sometimes, my faith is in question, so I utter it, for it is a powerful expression of faith, trust, and surrender* ***(P5)****.*

Dread is closely related to fear, yet in their belief that someone they know can make things work despite the difficulty/impossibility, the dread people feel is empowering (DeVita 2012). The respondents' claims reflected this, particularly regarding their feelings of hope despite their adverse situation. As Filipinos, one possesses inherent resiliency, which means one is flexible in facing these challenges and can learn to adapt to these conditions (Garcia 2024, 169). This is also evident in the Ilokano way of life, considering how they persevere through all life's adversities. All in all, these dreadful moments show that despite the situations that affect their view of life, they still hold onto God as someone who can guide them in the right direction.

3.1.2. Decision-making uncertainties

The second manifestation of *makaammo'n ti Apo* is decision-making uncertainty. This manifestation focuses on the Ilokanos' way of dealing with dilemmas, especially when making decisions that conflict with one's ideals and the needs of the circumstance. The respondents also referred to such situations in their responses.

> *I say it when I cannot decide well whether to do one thing or not, but the situation calls for an immediate final decision. After making my decision, I say to entrust it to God* ***(P1)****. ... I use it when there are things I am going through, and I am not confident in making decisions and*

actions about it. I say it to rest to God, whatever I cannot or fail to do due to my limitations as a human being ***(P3)****.*

In ethics, a dilemma arises when an individual or moral agent encounters choices that do not result in a favorable outcome. In turn, an individual is challenged to make a morally sound decision. Matienzo mentioned the experience of uncertainty among people, but their unwavering faith in an "impersonal Providence" moves people to hold on despite the present risks (Matienzo 2015, 94). This is regarded as an act where people remain grounded in their beliefs about what is true, good, and beautiful; however, when faced with dilemmas, they turn to a divine figure for guidance. It might seem to be a defeatist outlook, but Gripaldo emphasizes that it brings forth the value of trust (Gripaldo 2005). The trust in God that an Ilokano manifests resonates with the *"kinanakem"*[4] of oneself with others. Alterado and Jaramilla pointed to the relationality of an Ilokano to others as seen in the statement *"tao a maipateg"* (a person to be valued), where it emanates *"kinaimbag ti nakem"* (goodwill) through its *"panakilangenlangen"* (relationships) (Alterado and Jaramilla 2019, 101-2). The relationship of an Ilokano to "*Apo Dios*" (God) is deeply rooted in their *"pammati"* (belief) that they can overcome whatever struggles they face.

3.1.3. Pacifist conflict settlements

The third circumstance is about pacifistic conflict settlement. This circumstance points to the use of *makaammo'n ti Apo* as a way for an individual to avoid escalating tensions. When an Ilokano faces conflicts or checkmate situations, tensions may arise, and as an expression of one's *nakem*, an Ilokano might not resort to an aggressive or direct approach to these situations. From the participant's perspective, their responses are as follows:

I use it when I have a conflict with someone, and instead of escalating the conflict by engaging more with the problem, I say "makaammo'n ti Apo kanyana" (Let God be the one to deal with it) ***(P1)****. ... When I cannot understand why people are reacting to me differently, I do not spend effort dealing with such, I entrust them to God. "Makaammo ti Apo kanya dan" (Let God deal with them)* ***(P3)****.*

The responses portray the non-direct/non-aggressive approach of an Ilokano towards conflict. Situations manifest a person's *"kina-anus"* (patience) and *"kinatibker iti pakinakem"* (resoluteness). These attributes arise from the

[4] *Kinanakem* is derived from the word "*nakem*" which could mean one's thoughts, feelings, intellect, essence, and morality. For Alterado, it would also mean one's interiority. In the context of this statement, it dwells on the interiority (pagkatao) of an Ilokano. Danilo S. Alterado, Godofredo P.G. Nebrija, and Raul Leandro D. Villanueva, "Nakem and Virtue Ethics: Framing the Ilokano and Amianan Sense of Good Life," *Humanities Diliman* 20, no. 1 (2023).

experiences of Ilokanos with the *"sanut ti biag"* (whip of life's challenges and hardships) that are influenced by their unfortunate geographical location (Alterado et al. 2023, 31). The responses include *"kinaanus and kinatibker ti kainakem"* because the challenges must be overcome, but one must turn to God for the courage and knowledge to do so. This pacifist approach to conflict settlement is not a cowardly or avoidant means but rather a manifestation of hope where there is still a positive thing or a response that would happen despite the tenacity of the problem (Garcia 2024, 168). Aside from this, the *kinanakem* of an Ilokano is also grounded in their *pakilinangenlangen*; hence, their relationship with others is not strained when facing conflicts.

3.2. Reasons for *Makaammo'n ti Apo* Preference

3.2.1. Family and cultural upbringing

The first theme that surfaced in answering the second question is the participants' family and cultural upbringing, which is why *makaammo'n ti Apo* is their go-to statement. Upbringing conserves the ancestors' values/practices, and opinions (Panov 2013, 1). It carries on learned values and traditions from people one has directly interacted with and grown up with in the previous chapters of their life. It can be seen in the statements below how it held significance among the participants when asked why *makaammo'n ti Apo* is their default phrase when confronted with the different situations they mentioned in the previous section of the paper.

> *It is part of the culture and tradition I grew up with. If there are difficulties, it is God whom we should ask for help.* ***(P1)****. ... I was raised in a religious family and community where it is part of the culture to recognize the help of God* ***(P3)****.*

The participants explicitly mentioned that the practice of asking for God's help in times of difficulty and uncertainty is from their family and culture. The religious background of their families was also mentioned. It can be implied from their statements that if they talk about culture, it is the collective Ilokano culture they are referring to, which is constituted by their communal values, traditions, and practices. Supporting literature has already pointed out how religious the Ilokanos are. The Ilokanos' rich culture and religiosity can be observed in the celebrations of their festivities (Tagay and Ballesteros 2016, 27-40). Part of the Ilokano cultural upbringing is also the practice of *"atang,"* even in the present (Corpuz 2020, 113-26). The current liturgical celebrations in the Ilokano communities can also be observed with their fusion of cultural aspects, which is still part of carrying on the tradition of the Ilokano community from before (Almazan 2023, 7-33). In addition to what has been discussed, this study also found that asking for God's help in times of need, expressed through *makaammo'n ti Apo*, is

a cultural upbringing among the Ilokanos. Just like any Filipino, asking for the help of someone transcendent is a culturally embedded practice.

3.2.2. Faith expression

Despite having many aspects and paradoxical qualities, faith is commonly personal, subjective, and more profound than organized religion and relates to the relationship with God (Victor et al. 2020, 107-13). The participants' statement below depicts how their relationship with God inspires their expression of *makaammo'n ti Apo*.

> *It is part of my faith that God can make things matter when our efforts do not matter. As an Ilokano Christian, it is part of my belief – to always have faith in God* ***(P1)****. ... It is a convenient expression because, for someone who has faith, everything may fail except God, and trusting in Him and His ways will always be the way to go* ***(P2)****.*

What was portrayed in the participants' statements is religious faith—the recognition of God and entrusting one's endeavor to Him. The participants show confidence in their relationship with God, and this is why every time they are in a state of uncertainty, despair, or doubt, they immediately implore the help of God. It is done through their expression of *makaammo'n ti Apo.* An Ilokano saying, "*makaammo'n ti Apo*," expresses how they value their relationship with God. They confidently express such faith by entrusting that God is with them no matter what they go through. Just like any human relationship, the focal point of calling something a relationship is the presence of trust and commitment. Trust in a relationship also involves the simultaneous existence of positive and negative elements (Pratt and Dirks 2017, 117-36). Additionally, trust in the Lord leads towards *pannakapnek,* which translates to *pannakaisalakan* (Alterado 2023). [5] Therefore, the kind of faith the Ilokanos express is a relationship grounded on trust and confidence in God.

3.3.3. Automatic response mechanism

While the other participants heavily value the culture they grew up with and their religious faith as the main reason for their preference for *makaammo'n ti Apo*, other participants also highlighted a common yet personal reason for such. The participants' statements below feature *makaammo'n ti Apo,* likened to other common expressions and mindsets that do not necessarily reflect one's upbringing or faith, but a default expression emanating from daily language usage or common speech response.

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[5] *Pannakpnek* is an Iloko term which translates to "fullness/satisfaction". *Pannakaisalakan* is an Iloko term which translates to "salvation". Alterado, citing Valdez, stated that "*Pannakapnek* is preconditioned by the practice of *naimbag a nakem* in each person and the community" This leads to the the experience of *naimbag a biag* (good life).

> *"I did what I did, and I have decided already." Whenever I am in that situation, I say makaammo'n ti Apo as a default expression* ***(P1)****. ... It easily comes out of my mouth when I realize how serious a situation is. Especially when all things were decided upon, I later realized that there was a deficiency in how I decided. I cannot ask for time to move backward* ***(P3)****.*

The statements depict the recognition of time's irreversibility. The participants mentioned situations where *makaammo'n ti Apo* suddenly surfaces out of one's lack of other choice but to wait for what will happen next. It is seen that God's plan differs from one's own, which can be a source of complacency in life (Dean 2023). Although the statements reflect one's religious and cultural background, how they utilize and express *makaammo'n ti Apo* varies randomly compared to other participants. It appears that anyone, even not an Ilokano, but constantly hearing it from a colleague, will be able to spout it to fit one's situation.

Nevertheless, despite the randomness of the participants portrayed in the statements, the purpose of its usage still aligns. Mashal posits the role of randomness, which makes God emerge into us in an unexpected moment or situation through spirit-to-spirit communication and prayer (Mashal 2019). Therefore, it still accounts for the capacity of *makaammo'n ti Apo* to resonate spiritual, religious, and cultural values among those who patronize it.

3.4. *Makaammo'n ti Apo* as Ilokano Spirituality

Spirituality is a commonly used concept, but it has never had a universal definition. Establishing a universal definition of spirituality is elusive (Jastrzębski 2022, 113-31). Therefore, this study does not claim a universal or all-encompassing view of spirituality. Instead, it will discuss spirituality in how the Ilokanos make sense of their actions and the world, considering their relationship with themselves, others, and God.

3.4.1. Acknowledging human limitations

The primary theme from the interviews is the acknowledgment by the participants of their human limitations. The participants' recognition of their limitations affects how they relate to themselves, others, and God. It also affects how they see life in general and how they perform to achieve something personally and professionally. The statements below show the acknowledgment of their usage of *makaammo'n ti Apo*.

> *It makes me realize that our human ways are limited, imperfect, and insufficient. However, in realizing my human limitations, God's omnipotence, providence, and wisdom are more appreciated* ***(P2)****. … It is humbling to know that I cannot do everything independently* ***(P3)****.*

Self-differentiation, self-awareness, and other awareness are integral to spirituality (Gordon 2009, 5163). Self-awareness includes recognizing one's finitude

and limitations. One will know where to ground oneself regarding capacity, capability, expectations, and relationships by knowing one's limitations. People who acknowledge their limitations do not elevate themselves to a god-like status, believing they can possess everything. Recognizing one's limitations is important for relating to oneself, others, God, and the environment. The same case applies to how the participants' statements depict humbled Ilokano people as a result of limitations. By recognizing they cannot do all things, they have to ask fellow human beings and God for help, the more they entrust themselves to someone more than human: God.

3.4.2. Amplifying confidence in living

Their utterance of *makaammo'n ti Apo* assures them of a better life. Despite recognizing that they are imperfect, limited, and fully aware of their finitude, the Ilokano participants are not living in fear. Instead, they exemplify a typical Ilokano who enjoys life no matter what life brings. Alterado (2023, 176), in support, claims that Ilokanos are willing to invest time, effort, and all possible resources to acquire *pannakapnek* in life through the traits of *anus, gaget,* and *kired*.[6] The spirituality shaped and influenced by the *makaammo'n ti Apo* expression positively develops their relationship with others, performance, and trust in life and God. It confirms the idea that spirituality helps positively develop people and humanity (Lerner et al. 2005, 60).

First, the Ilokano's confidence in living is manifested through enhanced conflict resolution. Other awareness is a significant aspect of spirituality (Gordon 2009, 51). Awareness of others' existence and needs substantially affects one's dispositions, perspectives, and actions. The participants are fully aware of the differences between them and others. With differences come conflicts and misunderstandings. Though these are threats to relationships, they are also part of the thrills of human relations. For the participants, when dealing with conflicts with other people, *makaammo'n ti Apo* played a significant role in the peaceful and amicable settlement of conflicts. Below are the participants' statements evidencing such.

> *Furthermore, in relating to others, I am kinder to them, for God operates in our lives. Without God, everything would be in chaos. If anything happens, makaammo'n ti Apo anyway.* ***(P4)****.*
> *... I do not like arguments. I do not like to use it against a person because it affects me as a person. When I take things to heart, it really affects my life – it causes me stress. So, I surrender it to Him so that my feelings will lighten* ***(P8)****.*

The participants choosing a pacifist stance in dealing with problems may seem to tolerate negativity. The participants call it being kind to avoid conflicts. However, as pointed out multiple times by Participant 8, it is for the benefit of

[6] *Anus* is an Iloko term for "patience", *gaget* is "industry", and *kired* is "courage".

both parties involved in the conflict. Neither party will be harmed in the situation; they can let time and God do their thing to resolve the conflicts. Such a pacifist stance comes when they entrust God to deal with the conflict by saying *makaammo'n ti Apo*. Distancing from conflict instead of aggravating it reflects the Ilokanos being peace lovers and motivated to live positively. This reflects the importance of *ulimek* (silence) in leading towards genuine listening to one's *nakem* as it fosters interconnectedness with oneself, the world, and the greater cosmos (Alterado 2015). In this case, spirituality is not only knowing how to deal with other people but also pursuing positivity amidst all the expected chaos of the world.

Second, the Ilokano's secured future engagements manifest their confidence in living. Aside from dealing with conflicts positively that constitute the Ilokanos' confidence in living their lives, their hopefulness for the future is also notable in the interviews. The Ilokanos' hopefulness and their trust in God make them feel secure in the future. Hope has been proven to predict positive well-being (Ciarrocchi and Deneke 2005, 161-83). Hope is also an essential aspect of spirituality. The higher the level of spirituality, the lower the chances of feeling helplessness (Tsitsigkou 2024). Hope is evident among the Ilokano participants, making them confident in living their lives and letting them know that things will still be fine, whatever comes their way. This can be seen in the statements below.

> *I am also confident that God is there anyway when things go wrong with my decisions. That is part of resilience* ***(P3)****. ... At the same time, the positive outlook affects me because it removes what we worry about.* ***(P4)****.*

The sense of confidence among the participants surfaced as being attached to happiness. The confidence they acquire through their patronage of *makaammo'n ti Apo* or the entrusting of one's future endeavors to God is a facet of spirituality being lived by the participants. The way they live out their spirituality contributes to their claims of happiness. It has long been established that spirituality, or how one relates to someone bigger than oneself, directly correlates to happiness (Özgenel and Yılmaz 2020, 287-300). The participants' happiness is being free from fear of what might happen in the future. They live their lives enjoying the present moment and, at the same time, not worrying about tomorrow. Anyway, if tomorrow comes, *makaammo'n ti Apo*—God is there.

Third, the Ilokano's heightened sense of responsibility manifests their confidence in living. *Makaammo'n ti Apo* serves as a reminder and source of inspiration to fulfill obligations when times get rough and seemingly impossible to get things done due to struggles. This particular aspect of the *makaammo'n ti Apo* expression elucidates the seeming loophole in the participants' subscription to *makaammo'n ti Apo*. The loophole in *makaammo'n ti Apo* is the same as in *"Bahala Na"* spirituality, where there seems to be total surrender. However, this theme emphasizes that an Ilokano's subscription to *makaammo'n ti Apo* is not a mere

surrender. Instead, it is doing one's part and surrendering things beyond human control to God. The statements below will provide evidence for the claim.

> *Yes, in silence, it makes me think/reflect… There are realizations that maybe this choice is not for me, and I need to do something about it* ***(P6)****. ... As a professional, it motivates me to continue and persevere even if it is complicated. As a human being, it is not being lax, but it makes me optimistic* ***(P7)****. It invites our initiative to do something no matter what* ***(P5)****.*

The participants pointed out that action and efforts are part of entrusting to God. It confirms that faith comes with action. Otherwise, it would be a dead one or merely optimism without accompanying efforts. The responses also depict the earlier-mentioned characteristics of Ilokanos. Ilokanos are hardworking and thrifty (Pacris 2024). Therefore, an implication can be drawn from the participants' statements that work is part of the Ilokano spirituality manifested through their *makaammo'n ti Apo* mindset. The said spirituality is similar to the "*Ora et Labora*" spirituality, where work and prayer come into fusion (Hoffman 2007).

3.4.3. Recognition of the divine

Spirituality has many definitions and facets, and can be easily recognized if it is attached to or in recognition of someone more than human (Sharma and Sharma 2016, 2-6). The very utterance of the word is in recognition of the existence of a supreme, divine, or transcendent being, who, for the Ilokano participants, is the Christian God. Therefore, the summation of *makaammo'n ti Apo* as spirituality is in the Ilokanos' recognition of the divine.

First, the recognition of the divine among the Ilokano participants comes with entrusting themselves to God. It has been pointed out in the earlier sections that efforts accompany their expression of faith in God when they say *makaammo'n ti Apo*. In this section, the statements below show that the participants express a sense of surrender. However, it is important to note that surrender happens with what they cannot control, like what will happen in the following hours or with an already done event.

> *I surrender to God my human limits. For whatever I fail to do, may God take charge* ***(P5)****. ... life is unpredictable; thus, I pray every time I wake up, "makaammo kan Apo, please guide me"* ***(P6)****.*

Entrusting one's future, works, and efforts to God are common patterns of spirituality observed among religious groups whose founders exemplified such a kind of life—a total surrender of everything to God. The participants' statements resemble such spirituality. Surrender is not about being callous and lazy to expect someone to do the work for them. Instead, it is an act of faith, hopefulness, and worship marked with respect for the one whom they owe and share the life they live.

Second, fortifying one's faith is strengthening one's relationship with God. One is responsible for growing in the relationship one commits to, especially with God. Cultivation of one's faith in God is not for His benefit. Instead, it is more beneficial to people since the act leads to their betterment and capacity to transcend their humanity (Davids and Waghid, 2018). The use of *makaammo'n ti Apo* among the participants, as evidenced by the statements below, helped strengthen their faith as Christians.

> *I do not use it as a mere word but instead act on this faith wholeheartedly. When I say makaammo'n ti Apo, I need to help myself to do what I can do and have the courage to face the things that I am facing* ***(P5)****. ... It is not just saying the word, but there is a need to help oneself to pray, go to church, to worship, where it would grow that faith* ***(P5)****.*

The participants' statements highlight that having and strengthening one's faith is not to elate and appease God. Instead, strengthening one's faith is recognizing the guidance and help God is offering them. The Ilokanos recognize that it is not God who needs the people but the people needing God. Alterado and Barayuga (2025), in their readings on Isabelo Delos Reyes, noted that *"nakem"* unites the innermost core of Ilokanos, including one's faith, culture, ecology, and relationships. With this, one's faith is fortified in God and how one relates to each other, the world, and the greater cosmos. Thus, fortifying one's faith, through *makaammo'n ti Apo*, leads one to recognize the divine and further affirm his divinity.

Makaammo'n ti Apo, as portrayed in this descriptive study, lays the foundation for recognizing Ilokano spirituality. While descriptive, the paper opened the directions and possibilities of Ilokano cultural contributions to contemporary religious and theological studies. The significance and relevance it holds among the Ilokanos are equally important for recognition, as any other cultural group holds a place in the identified body of knowledge. The study also affirmed and supported existing studies on the topic. The topic examined was woven into other Ilokano expressions and terminologies. The versatility of *makaammo'n ti Apo*, as a mindset and an expression, to be talked hand-in-hand with other Ilokano and Filipino concepts, proves its pervasiveness and deep cultural and religious significance among the Ilokanos. This landmark study can ignite more studies to feature and examine the richness of the Ilokano and Filipino culture and traditions intertwined with religiosity, from which their spirituality emanates.

4. Conclusion

The study confirmed once again that spirituality emanates from culture and religion. *Makaammo'n ti Apo*, as an expression and prayer emanating from the Ilokano culture and tradition, proved its worth and relevance as an Ilokano spirituality. *Makaammo'n ti Apo,* as an Ilokano spirituality, dwells in the innermost self

of an Ilokano, grasping for its interconnectedness to everything, from natural to the supernatural. Such spirituality radiates the unique communal identity of the Ilokanos, where community is everything. Though the study surfaced a facet only of the Ilokano spirituality, significant realizations surfaced that the way they think and relate with others (including God, other creations, and the environment) are always in consideration of other people.

However, the study's result cannot be claimed universally, as there are limitations in the representation of the whole Ilokano community. This is just an attempt to discover a facet of how Ilokanos are, particularly their dealings with life and belief in the supernatural. Considering the findings and discussions, this study is also an invitation among the different fields to excavate the richness of Ilokano culture, provided through their different lenses. Future studies might want to delve into this phenomenon's philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and linguistic facets, which were focused on in this study. Nevertheless, this study's ideas, thoughts, and knowledge are relevant to understanding contemporary faith and spirituality, particularly of the Ilokanos.

Statements and Declarations

The intellectual content of this paper, including its conceptualization, problematization, argumentation, and drafting, was produced exclusively by the authors. Grammarly was the only AI tool used, solely for grammar checking and linguistic correction. No other generative artificial intelligence tools were used.

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Ferdinand Ulrich's Concept of Being: Reimagining Catholic Purpose in the Age of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Ferdinand Ulrich's concept of Being explores and describes Being as a gift rooted in God's love. This paper explores how Ulrich's philosophy can be a guide for Catholics in finding meaning and deeper purpose in today's era driven by social media. Today's social media has caused negative effects on the lives of many, which can sometimes lead to inappropriate and misleading content, narcissism on social media, and social media addiction. Such issues arising from social media destroy authentic human existence and purpose, as well as one's Catholic values. Ulrich's conception of Being as God's gift of love offers a perspective on how one can recognize and understand the true meaning of being a Catholic amidst such challenges arising from social media. His teachings remind one that existence is meant to lead to one's true Being. By applying Ulrich's concepts, Catholics can approach social media with values rooted in love and charity rather than prioritizing selfish motives and an unauthentic way of living. Drawing from Ulrich's concept of Being as God's gift of love, this paper argues for a renewed Catholic perspective that encourages authentic connection, self-giving, and the transcending of self-centered and materialistic tendencies steered by social media. As such, the paper takes a philosophical-theological interpretative approach in using Ulrich's metaphysics as a lens to reimagine and reframe the Catholic Purpose in engaging with social media.

Keywords: *social media, being, likeness of divine goodness, Catholic purpose*

1. Introduction

In our contemporary era, different advancements have already infiltrated different societies. That is why many people now live in a period dominated by technological advancements. These technological advances have a great impact on the lives of many, wherein they have transformed almost every aspect of daily living. From the way people work, travel, and communicate to the way they enjoy different kinds of entertainment, technology has played a big role in the changes in society. In the continuous development of technology in modern society, social media was developed.

Over the years, social media has developed at a rapid pace, resulting in the emergence of various social networking sites. It began with the simple text messaging, calling, chat, and email phenomenon, but then later, social media evolved into different platforms together with the development of the internet. With the rapid development of social media, much of society today is integrated into engagement with and immersion in social media. Social media can be defined as a tool of technology that connects users with ideas and other users in a virtual manner (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Boyd and Ellison further note that social media allows users to have human interaction with each other through a virtual community. As such, the age of social media shows the characteristics of virtual connectivity, an abundance of information, and interactive engagement with people around the globe. Indeed, social media has helped allot in the development of communication and social interaction, and even in many aspects of society. Though the emergence and development of social media have been very helpful to many people and to modern society, it has still posed challenges and undesirable effects.

Due to the emergence and development of social media, the Catholic Church recognizes its importance as well as the challenges posed by it. The Church sees these media as "gifts of God" which, in accordance with His providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for their salvation (*Communio et Progressio* 1971, 2). The Church recognizes that social media, as a gift from God, can be a powerful tool and has the potential to help in spreading God's love to people. On the other hand, the Church also recognizes the risk that social media can threaten and undermine the Catholic Purpose. The Catholic Church also plays an important role in reminding and guiding different people, especially Catholics, about the proper utilization of social media. Inter Mirifica (1963), a Vatican II decree on the media of social communications, emphasized that the Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. *Inter Mirifica* is still relevant especially in our time dominated by social media. This decree is both a warning and a message meant to

wake Catholics up to find authentic meaning and purpose in the age of social media. Hence, there is a need to address the challenges and problems posed by social media by reimagining one's Catholic Purpose.

2. The Catholic Purpose in the Age of Social Media

The Catechism for Filipino Catholics (1997, 691) strongly emphasizes that "each of us is called to 'image' God in a unique way." In a simple sense, the Catholic Purpose is to radiate God's image and likeness here on earth, just as Jesus did. The very model of such purpose is patterned after Jesus' life. As Catholics, it is one's duty and responsibility to follow Jesus' examples, especially in the challenges of today. As social media rapidly continues to change the world, its dangers and challenges pose a threat to one's Catholic Purpose. Thus, it is essential to look back and understand what "Catholic Purpose" truly is.

2.1. The Catholic Purpose

The human person, in essence, is tasked to find meaning in his/her existence. From this view, the human person is not simply understood as a being that exists, rather, the human person is a being that exists for a purpose. On the one hand, one sees the point that the human person is an embodied spirit: a being that is analogically between the metaphysical (spirit/soul) and material (body). The human person understood in this way implies that we are the only beings who questions ourselves and the world around us. The human person as an embodied spirit, takes into account the Catholic Doctrine that pertains to man as composed of body and soul. The human person in a special manner has always been taken seriously, and for Catholics taking seriously the human person means taking seriously the Creator God who became incarnate in the humanity of Jesus (Gula 1989, 79). The human person is an embodied spirit journeying towards God. Endowed with a body and soul, intellect and will, the human person has the capacity to sense and interact on a higher level with the sensible world and even question one's own existence. This composition is the basic understanding of the human person and is further expounded in the human person's purpose in life. For this reason, the human person continually asks himself/herself about the meaning and purpose of his/her life.

The Catholic Church explains that "God calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength" (CCC 1994, 9, 1). This entails what being a Catholic really is. For the Church, the Catholic Purpose is anchored to the Being of every person—that is, 'being the image and likeness of God'. Catholics ultimately view their Being in relation to their faith. In contrast, the source of the Catholic Purpose also flows from their Being: to know, to love, and to serve God is to reach the fullness of truly becoming God's image and likeness here on earth.

It is the duty of every Catholic to understand their true and real purpose as the image and likeness of God no matter what the challenges of the world may be.

2.2. The Age of Social Media

Social media was made possible through the internet and has become part of contemporary society. Through it, communication has been made faster and easier. According to Siddiqui and Singh (2016) social media are computer tools that allow people to share or exchange information, ideas, images, videos, and even more with each other through a particular network. Social media is a visual communication method in which topics are created, shared, and exchanged by users, allowing them to interact with each other through text messages, images, videos, and private messages, to which other users can respond and participate (Ahmed 2023). Such definitions of social media point out to its purpose which is social connection and communication. Social media allows users and those who engage in it to create connections with other people either locally or globally. In the continuous development of social media, it results in the progress of communication, education, business, and other aspects of society. Regardless of such results, there is an underlying downside to social media.

2.2.1. On virtual connectivity

Social media allows people to stay connected in an online world regardless of geographical distance or other obstacles (Pellegrino et al. 2022). The emergence of social media has made great contributions to society around the world, making people virtually connect with one another. Elsayed (2021, 3) states that "social media is a virtual place where communication takes place through the means of dialogue, chat, comment, photography." Due to social media, information is easily relayed, content sharing is pervasive, and communication is globalized. Over the past 15 years, people have become intertwined with a multitude of social media platforms (Lohmann and Zagheni 2023). Due to various social media platforms, many people have already become accustomed to the use of social media. Social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace and Facebook have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 210). Many social media platforms have become a source of virtual connectivity among different people. As such, social media has made a great contribution to expanding communication, entertainment, and information across the globe.

Although social media has made great contributions to connecting people virtually, it also has its downsides. Since there is no longer geographical boundaries in the usage of social media, there is easier access to different content in different social media platforms. According to Pang (2022, 556) "exposure to the internet and social media can absorb a lot of negative knowledge and guidance." Regardless of how social media attempts to create a safer virtual world for as

many people as possible, the issue remains that negative and inappropriate content is still accessible. Due to such issues, many people are prone to content (images, videos, comments, ideas) that can be harmful to their own well-being.

2.2.2. On social media addiction and narcissism

Another prominent characteristic of the age of social media is social media addiction. Many people can get addicted to the use of social media through the different social media platforms or Social Networking Sites (SNS). Social networking sites or platforms like Facebook, MySpace, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, etc. have attracted millions of people from all over the world in which many have integrated and are addicted to using them in their daily lives (Noori et al. 2023). As social media homogeneous communication has caught the world by storm, users' fingers and thumbs bounce on handheld keyboards with heads faced downward (Langmia and Tyree 2017, 2). Many people have been overly exposed and enticed to the usage of different social media platforms to the extent that it has already become a form of addiction. According to Aslan and Polat (2024), spending more than three hours on social media platforms can lead to social media addiction, culminating in low mental health that affects work and academic productivity. It is understandable that the utilization of social media nowadays is normal, but the act of excessive use of social media results in negative implications. These social media platforms offer a variety of services ranging from entertainment to business, news and sports, and many other types of content. The content that these platforms offer is the reason why people keep on engaging themselves in them, which can also result in non-stop engagement and consume a lot of the users' time. "Social media has been a clever trick to get people talking, clicking and typing without end. The addictive side of social media cannot be denied." (Lovink 2016, 30). The case of social media addiction is indeed very evident nowadays. Just looking at people spending almost every hour scrolling, clicking and typing gives the impression that many have already fallen into social media addiction. Such addiction to social media happens to anyone, and it can be experienced by children, teenagers, adults, and even older people. Watkins (2009) emphasizes that "teens are not the only ones drawn to the world of social media or the practice of using the Web to share their lives with peers. Starting around 2006, the presence of adults in digital spaces like Facebook began to increase sharply." Indeed, addiction to social media can happen to anyone, and people from different age brackets can fall into such addiction.

Further research on social media also suggests that narcissism is also a factor that leads to social media addiction. Alarcon and Sarabia (2012) state that "most contemporary studies refer to narcissism as a relatively broad behavioral trait domain, expressed by, among others, self-centered grandiosity, arrogance, manipulativeness, and similar features." Narcissism can be viewed as overemphasizing self-qualities, achievements, wealth, and power. As such, narcissism has

something to do with overbolstering one's ego. Moving further, over emphasis of such things are now accessible through social media. Examples of such are excessive bragging of wealth in Instagram or excessive posting of selfies on Facebook while emphasizing bodily features. Social media applications may serve as ideal social arenas for individuals who appreciate and are attracted to engaging in ego-enhancing activities as they enable individuals to bolster their egos on the basis of instant feedback from potentially large numbers of other individuals (Andreassen et al. 2017). Individuals high in narcissism are more likely to be influenced by social media addiction (Alarcon and Sarabia 2016). As social media has been an open ground for diversified socialization, people with narcissistic tendencies have more means to engage themselves in activities that allow them to brag and overbolster their egos. Moreover, narcissistic people tend to take advantage of various social media platforms to overgratify themselves and spend excessive time on social media, resulting in social media addiction. Thus, social media addiction also influences the continual promotion of narcissistic traits in people.

3. Ulrich's Concept of Being

Ferdinand Ulrich is known for his profound philosophical work on the interpretation of Being as a gift. The core of his philosophy is the concept of the "necessary sense of being" which he emphasizes in his work, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*. Ulrich contextualized the question of Being into a drama, and this was excellently explained by Hans Urs von Balthasar. According to Balthasar, where else is it better to grasp God's action than on the stage of existence itself, a stage that God freely inhabits as the chief actor, signalling the move from drama to "theo-drama" (Lett 2023, 17). Theo-drama is a portrayal of the interaction between the Creator and creation, of the action of God on the stage of creation, and the movement of creation toward God. In this theo-drama, Ulrich emphasizes that the human person, as a creation of God, has received the gift of love—Being. Receiving such a gift of love reflects the purpose of the human person, which is to return to God. Understanding Being is an essential part of understanding such purpose.

3.1. The Contradiction and Dilemma in Understanding Being

The question of Being in Ulrich's speculative unfolding seems to be a difficult task. But at a time when the human person hardly understands the true meaning of being human, Ulrich reminds us that we must not give up on our metaphysical task of recognizing our origin—God. In order to recognize such, one starts with Being. Beginning with the speculative unfolding of Being, a question arises: "How can the human person think of Being when he himself is within Being?" There is

a dilemma in that the human person is always already in Being, and yet one does not have a direct experience of Being. Ulrich (2018) additionally mentions, "to be sure, we do make our 'beginning' in being. Nevertheless, the reason we do so is to unmask this being in its 'pseudo-subsistence' and thus to see through the contradiction that had been elevated into the basic substance of speculative thought." We begin in Being and thus come to the different dilemmas posed by Being, such as the contradiction seen in the vicious circle (endlessly questioning Being) and the temptations of thought (hypostasizing Being). The contradiction of positing Being as our beginning tends to create a problem in thought. How can we begin with Being if it is to be the goal in itself? It seems to be confusing, but then Ulrich (2018) states that "we overcome the contradiction if we assess it correctly through reason." For Ulrich, the contradiction of beginning with Being and ending with Being itself is just part of the speculative unfolding of Being. It is a dilemma, wherein the human person gets confused, and yet it is part of the process of understanding Being. The danger of such a dilemma in understanding Being is that it could lead the human person to the temptation of hypostasizing Being. This means that there is the tendency for the human person to misunderstand Being, resulting in defining and understanding Being the wrong way. That is why in this dilemma, without proper direction, the human person can end up in temptation. Through the use of reason, the human person can properly understand such a dilemma and escape from it.

The moment that the human person has overcome the dilemma of understanding Being, he/she comes to understand Being in a new light, that is, understanding Being as the "Likeness of Divine Goodness," also known as the *similitudo divinae bonitatis*, which Ulrich grounds on St. Thomas Aquinas (Lopez 2019). But then another temptation arises: when the Likeness of Divine Goodness is misunderstood, it results in seeing Being as an imitation of God. Being is not merely a copy of the image of God nor is it God Himself. In the human person's limited capacity to think and reason, the temptation arises to think that Being as the Likeness of Divine Goodness is equated with or is an imitation of God. Being, as the Likeness of Divine Goodness, is a pure mediation between God and creatures, as the likeness of God's absolute generosity. God gives Being totally and freely, and Being, as self-emptying, does not cling to itself in likeness to its origin, God. The temptation to misunderstand Being and God, can only be overcome through focusing one's thought on the Likeness of Divine Goodness. This means seeing it as a gift, as a sharing in God's divine generosity instead of viewing it separately.

When the human person ends up with the dilemma and temptation of understanding Being the wrong way, there is a tendency for Being to be understood as a mere metaphysical concept that does not really have any meaning in the world. In such a case, the truth of Being as a gift and as the Likeness of Divine Goodness is covered up and never really understood by the human person. Furthermore, misunderstanding Being could also lead to misunderstanding God as well. Ulrich

critically warns that questioning and understanding Being has the tendency of keeping us away from the truth. Furthermore, knowing such danger must not impede one from knowing the truth about Being, but should all the more make one take up the responsibility to delve deeper into understanding Being. Taking the responsibility to delve deeper into Being, one understands that the human person has the metaphysical task of questioning and understanding Being.

3.2. Being as a Gift—The Likeness of Divine Goodness

Moving further, Being as the Likeness of Divine Goodness is also considered by Ulrich as pure mediation that reflects the infinite loving presence of God. It is from this understanding that the radical movement of thought finds its way, and is able to attain an encounter with God, Himself, hidden 'in' being, at the very same time that it comes to a thoughtful agreement with the world of created things (Ulrich 2018). This understanding of Being is considered a radical movement to emphasize that one must ground his/her speculative unfolding of Being in relation to existing beings. The human person relates to and understands Being from other beings. In such an encounter with other beings, the human person encounters God, who reveals Himself and also hides Himself in beings. But then another temptation arises if such understanding is not guided properly, and that is the temptation to understand God by mere logic and analogy. To make it clear, Ulrich does not point to mere reduction from God to creation, or from creation to creatures, rather Ulrich warns us to check one's approach to understanding once again the relationship between God and creation, and between creation and creatures. One should not interpret God through creatures, since, as part of creation, creatures are already a manifestation of God's goodness. In this sense, one realizes the difference between one's Being and the existence of God, and one also realizes the ontological difference set forth. The human person cannot separate himself/herself from other members of creation. Likewise, one cannot separate one's Being from the Creator—God.

For Ulrich, Being is grounded in the light of Divine Goodness, and the human person is drawn to it, for it continuously calls him/her towards itself and towards God. Ulrich calls us back again to the notion that the human person, as part of creation, shares in the Divine Goodness of God. The human person shares in this Divine Goodness through the mediation of Being. Rachel Coleman (2019) states that the necessary sense of being—that is, the inner dynamism that ultimately makes being what it is—comes from Being's origin and that of which it is the likeness, God, who is love. As part of creation, the human person radiates the Likeness of Divine Goodness through one's Being, a product of God's love. The necessary sense of Being ultimately springs forth from God's love, and as such, the very nature of Being is drawn towards God, who is its origin. Since the human person has been bestowed with the gift of Being, he/she should be drawn towards God. Allowing oneself not to be drawn to God is disobedience to the

call of Being, which is the call towards God. Such disobedience to the call of Being is also a denial of God's gift of love. Martin Beiler (2019, 51) states that "only through God's presence in us through his communication of being can we think and want at all." God's presence in the human person through his communication of Being speaks of having freewill and intellect. The nature of the gift of freewill and intellect shares the same nature as Being, which is goodness. On the other hand, the nature of these gifts could also be abused, which leads to the act of misusing such gifts. It is then the duty of the human person to cherish the gifts bestowed upon him/her, and to make use of such gifts to elevate one's Being towards God.

3.3. Being as a Gift to be Given

In *Homo Abyssus*, Ulrich (2018) ultimately posits the Perfect Being as Jesus Christ—the Incarnate Word. Jesus' incarnation sums up the wholeness of God's gift of being as love and as Divine Goodness. As discussed earlier, Being as itself is the Likeness of Divine Goodness, but Jesus becoming flesh is the fullness of Divine Goodness. Jesus' Incarnation culminates the perfection of Being, which the human person is trying to achieve. Ulrich emphasizes that only through Jesus do we fully come to understand our true being—for He is the Perfect Being, the perfect Divine Goodness. Thus, the human person can only reach God by understanding and going through the Perfect Being—Jesus. Through Jesus, the human person is able to move forward to his/her original beginning, who is God.

When one patterns his/her own being after the Perfect Being, one understands and realizes his/her purpose. Ulrich (2018, 70) points out that "being must give itself up, and it must do so unreservedly." This was expounded by Coleman (2018, 192) when she stated, "being, in a certain sense, is to be an arrow that never points to itself, but rather always simultaneously pointing in two directions: back to its origin and forward to subsistent beings." One's being was never meant to be fully focused on the self, rather it was meant to focus on God and to others. That is why Ulrich (2018, 30) always emphasizes "being is fullness given away." This was greatly exemplified in the person of Jesus. His life, passion, and death are the perfect example and demonstration of one's true being. He showed how one should radiate God's gift into this world. To radiate God's gift into the world is to freely give it to others, just as Jesus did.

Being as a gift is meant to be given as well to other beings. Being's essence is a gift, and at the same time, Being's purpose is to be given. Marine De La Tour (2019, 30) mentions that "Being is really given, and this gift is fruitful." As one's being is given by God as a gift, it follows that this gift should also be given in order to fulfil its purpose of truly becoming fruitful. As such, Being, as a gift of God's love and generosity, must also be diffused to others as a reflection of God's love and generosity.

4. Reimagining the Catholic Purpose in the Age of Social Media

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that the purpose of the human person is to know, to love, and to serve God. This has been taught as the primary doctrine in understanding the Catholic Purpose. It is a sad reality that many Catholics tend to forget such simple Catholic doctrine. This is somehow a side effect of the negative implications of the Age of Social Media. That is why the Church continuously reminds her members to look back and examine themselves in order to assess whether they are still being true to their own identity and purpose.

4.1. The Challenges of the Age of Social Media on the Catholic Purpose

The rapid rise of social media in recent years has sparked concerns about its associated risks and challenges. First is the danger of being exposed to inappropriate and misleading content due to virtual connectivity. Second is the risk of the promotion of narcissism due to the wide access to open social media platforms. Third is the danger of social media addiction. The Church is no stranger to these dangers and challenges brought about by social media. That is why the Church is also aware that even her members are prone to fall into the dangers of social media. In the Pontifical Council for Social Communication document *Church and Internet* (2002, 4), it stated that "the world of social communications may at times seem at odds with the Christian message." Social media has contents, ideologies, and domains that are not always in line with the message of Christ. This also points to potential harm that social media can inflict on Catholics.

John Paul II's message on the 35th World Communications Day, entitled "'Preach from the Housetops': The Gospel in the Age of Global Communication" (2001), had already foreseen such a problem when he mentioned that "the world of the media can sometimes seem indifferent and even hostile to Christian faith and morality. In such a view, what matters is not the truth but 'the story'; if something is newsworthy or entertaining, the temptation to set aside considerations of truth becomes almost irresistible." His words somehow resonate with what is happening in social media nowadays. In the current social media trend, the truth is already undermined, and entertainment and personal satisfaction are prioritized. Moreover, *Dilexit Nos* (2024) states that "in contemporary society, people risk losing their centre, the centre of their very selves." Pope Francis' words also pertain to the potential harm that social media can do, and in particular, the negative effects of social media on how Catholics live their lives. When Catholics fall prey to the dangers of social media, they tend to forget their own being and purpose as Catholics. The Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, in *Let Your Speech Always Be Gracious* (2024), also adds that the design of the platforms and the algorithms that dictate their performance can play on the worst of our human tendencies, leading to online environments that violate the core Christian values of truth and human

dignity. Exposure to inappropriate and misleading content on social media may lead Catholics to gradually drift from their Christian values. Pope Francis (2018), in his message during the 52nd World Communications Day, warns that "in today's fast-changing world of communications and digital systems, we are witnessing the spread of what has come to be known as fake news." The Holy Father recognizes that the utilization of social media has also become a medium for the spread of fake news and misinformation. When Catholics are bombarded with rapid feeds of fake news and misinformation, the truth is obscured. When such unfortunate things happen to Catholics, then their Catholic Purpose is somehow distorted and even misled.

Going further, Catholics are also facing the challenge of increased narcissism on social media platforms. Individuals with narcissistic traits use social media excessively because these online platforms may fulfill a need for affiliation and confirm the sense of an idealized self (Andreassen et al. 2017). Since social media has been widely open to people, narcissistic individuals have taken advantage of social media as a means to bolster their own egocentric qualities. The Australian Episcopal Conference (2019) states that "social media provide a perfect platform for a range of behaviours that are offensive to human dignity." The increased narcissism bolstered by social media platforms is indeed offensive to human dignity. Furthermore, examples of narcissism on social media do not only encourage Catholics to have a negative mindset, but they also encourage a sense of insensitivity towards the situation of other people. Hence, the danger of social media poses a threat to Catholics because it may also bolster their narcissistic tendencies. On the one hand, such danger can also encourage other Catholics to develop narcissistic tendencies through social media platform content. Narcissism aggravated by social media develops a sort of negative behavior and offensive action that can undermine or compromise the dignity of others. When this happens, Catholics engaged in narcissism and social media addiction tend to decline in terms of morality. This is one of the worst things that can happen to a Catholic—to slowly lose the sense of morality. This is clearly a violation of being a Catholic and, in a deeper sense, a loss of the authentic Catholic Purpose.

Lastly, the Catholic Purpose is challenged by the continued rise of social media addiction. Andreassen and Pallesen (2014) define social media addiction as "being overly concerned about SNSs (Social Networking Sites), being driven by a strong motivation to log on to or use SNSs, and devoting so much time and effort to SNSs that it impairs other social activities, studies/job, interpersonal relationships, and/or psychological health and well-being." Social media addiction negatively affects many aspects of a person's life. In this sense, social media affects the purpose and existence of a person. Since addiction to social media has made its way into people's lives, many Catholics have also fallen prey to social media addiction. The Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (2024) says that while social media's speed and reach exponentially increase the potential good it can do, they also increase

the potential harm it can do. Social media addiction has been one of the challenges that Catholics are facing. There is a danger that some Catholics may also be enticed by social media and slowly become addicted to it. This leads to the violation and destruction of the essence of being a Catholic, which in turn results in the loss of one's Catholic Purpose. Furthermore, social media can also give the illusion of creating bridges between people when it is in fact tearing apart our common life (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2024). This is what happens to one's being when one falls into social media addiction. The very essence of social media as communication is destroyed, and thus social media becomes a pitfall rather than a bridge for genuine communication. Pope Francis' Encyclical *Dilexit Nos* (2024) mentions, "I dream of a communication that can help us in recognizing the dignity of each human being, and in working together to care for our common home." Such a dream conveys how Catholics should understand and utilize social media in the light of their own true purpose.

4.2. Reimagining the Catholic Purpose in the Lens of Ulrich's Concept of Being

Going back to Ulrich's concept of Being, one understands that Being is the Likeness of Divine Goodness. It is clear that when Catholics fall into the dangers of social media (exposure to inappropriate content, narcissism in social media, and addiction), the Likeness of Divine Goodness is tainted and sometimes distorted. In this sense, the movement of one's Being towards God is thwarted. Furthermore, Stefan Oster (2019) cites Ulrich's ideas and says that "God is not only the first cause of his creation, He also gives to creation the capacity to be a cause itself, the causa secunda." Ulrich has adopted this idea from Thomas Aquinas; it explains that God causes the existence of the human person by pouring out the gift of Being. As a result, the human person also shares such qualities and has the capability to create a cause for many things. In a specific sense, the human person, as a creation, also becomes a 'co-creator' of God in the world. The human person, as co-creator, has been given the highest capacity of becoming a cause in the world. Thus, the human person, as God's co-creator in the world, must take up the responsibility to empty his/her own Being to other beings, to the world, and to God. In light of this, Catholics are considered co-creators of God in the world. As co-creators, Catholics have the necessary task to create a better world, which can direct his/her own being and other beings toward God. Furthermore, as co-creators of God, Catholics must learn to properly communicate their Being out of love for God and for the rest of creation. When Catholics understand their role as co-creators, they also understand their necessary sense of Being, and that is to become a gift, just as God gifted Being as a manifestation of His love to us.

Ulrich's concept of Being sheds light on the true meaning of the Catholic Purpose. Since Being is a gift of love from God, in return it is every Catholic's

responsibility to radiate such a gift. The Catechism sums this up: "God who created man out of love also calls him to love" (CCC 1994, 1604, 375). This is the very essence of the Catholic Purpose. Just as God has given one's Being as a gift of love, so Catholics are given the duty to do likewise. In this age of social media, the Being of every Catholic is challenged to respond accordingly and appropriately. Firstly, there is the challenge of being exposed to inappropriate and misleading content on social media platforms. Such a challenge can impede Catholics from understanding their own Being as a gift. Since some content in social media platforms is inappropriate and misleading, it can become a factor in the distortion of understanding one's Being as a gift. When this happens, social media can become a factor in the distortion of understanding Being as a gift. Ulrich points this out in the dilemma of understanding Being. When Catholics are too engrossed with inappropriate and misleading information coming from social media, then there is the tendency to understand Being in a subjective and preferential way. Understanding Being in this way impedes Catholics in their metaphysical task of going back to their Origin. For Ulrich, the concept of Being is fundamentally a philosophy of communication and of dialogue (Beiler 2019, 43). In Ulrich's philosophy, Being is the means of mediation between the human person and God. It is through Being that one communicates with God, and it is through Being that God's grace is established toward us. If Catholics' understanding of Being is misled by various factors due to social media, then there is a risk of having a distorted understanding. In this sense, Being as the fundamental communication with God is impeded and severed. In order to prevent such a thing from happening, the Church continuously reminds Catholics regarding the proper and careful use of social media.

Second, there is the challenge of rising narcissism due to the wide access to open social media platforms and the challenge of addiction. The very concept of narcissism and addiction is the opposite of Ulrich's concept of Being as a gift and as a gift to be given. For Ulrich, "being must surrender itself so that beings can come to be" (Coleman 2019, 192). Being, in its essence, must radiate God's image and likeness to other beings. In this context, Catholics are expected to freely and wholeheartedly share God's gift of love with other people. If narcissism and addiction prevail in Catholics' use of social media, then the gift of Being is not shared nor is it diffused to other people. *The Church and Internet* (2002, 2) emphasizes that "the media of social communication must contribute greatly to the enlargement and enrichment of men's minds and to the propagation and consolidation of the kingdom of God." The Church greatly emphasizes that social media must be used in ways that benefit humankind and promote the propagation of God's Kingdom on earth. As such, it should be clear that the Catholic Purpose, in response to one's Being, is to radiate God's Image and Likeness to other people and not destroy such image.

In John Paul II's message on the 35th World Communications Day, entitled "'Preach from the Housetops': The Gospel in the Age of Global

Communication" (2001), he strongly encourages Catholics not to be afraid to throw open the doors of social communications to Christ, so that his Good News may be heard from the housetops of the world! John Paul II's message is also, in essence, anchored in Ulrich's idea of the 'Perfect Being'—Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word. The call of Being imbibed in every Catholic and every person is to turn towards God. But this is only possible by encountering the Perfect Being, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of Being as love and as a gift. His incarnation into the world is the greatest act of Being's emptying of oneself, radiating the splendour of Divine Goodness. Jesus' Incarnation shows the fullness of God's love to humankind. As Catholics and as followers of Christ, it is our task to align our whole Being towards love. It is our task to reciprocate God's love by fulfilling our Catholic Purpose in truly loving, serving, and knowing God.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the role of understanding one's Catholic Purpose in this age of social media through the lens of Ulrich's concept of Being. Catholics are called to delve deeper into their Being by understanding that their Being is God's gift of love that is given and meant to be shared. In this sense, Being is also seen as sharing in the Likeness of Divine Goodness.

Today, the Catholic purpose is facing significant challenges brought about by social media. Inappropriate and misleading contents, narcissism and social media addiction have negatively impacted Catholics, in a sense that many have slowly forgotten their identity and purpose as Catholics. Being exposed to inappropriate and misleading contents, indulging in social media narcissism and addiction is a clear violation of Ulrich's concept of Being, which can lead to destructive implications in one's Catholic Purpose. When Catholics fall prey into inappropriate and misleading contents, to narcissism in social media, and to social media addiction, then their Being become distorted which turns them slowly away from God. Moreover, when Catholics fail to properly utilize social media, it affects their own purpose and being as Catholics.

Today, the Catholic Purpose is facing significant challenges brought about by social media. Inappropriate and misleading content, narcissism, and social media addiction have negatively impacted Catholics, in the sense that many have slowly forgotten their identity and purpose as Catholics. Being exposed to inappropriate and misleading content, indulging in social media narcissism, and falling into addiction are clear violations of Ulrich's concept of Being, which can lead to destructive implications for one's Catholic Purpose. When Catholics fall prey to inappropriate and misleading content, to narcissism in social media, and to social media addiction, then their Being becomes distorted, which turns them

slowly away from God. Moreover, when Catholics fail to properly utilize social media, it affects their own purpose and Being as Catholics.

In conclusion, Ulrich's concept of Being is a reminder for Catholics to reimagine their purpose by turning toward their Being and reassessing their own Being. Catholics are also called to anchor themselves in Jesus, the Perfect Being, in order to be guided in facing the challenges of social media. Ultimately, in this age of social media, reimagining the Catholic Purpose is to pattern our Being after Jesus—the Perfect Being.

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God, Government, and the Spotlight: Trust, Tensions, and Perceptions in Indonesia's Religious Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving relationship between religion, governance, and digital communication in Indonesia, focusing on how public trust is constructed within a complex and pluralistic religious landscape. Drawing on Public Trust Theory as the primary analytical lens, the research investigates how perceptions of government fairness, procedural legitimacy, transparency, and representational inclusivity influence citizens' trust in state institutions, particularly regarding religious policy. Through a mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative narrative responses, the study examines Indonesians' evaluations of the state's role in managing religious affairs and the broader impact of digital media on shaping public perceptions. Findings suggest that fairness and consistency in governance remain the most significant determinants of trust, while social media functions as both an informative bridge and a disruptive force, capable of amplifying inclusivity as well as polarization. The study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on religious pluralism, political legitimacy, and communication practices, offering insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and

communication strategists seeking to strengthen institutional transparency, inclusivity, and trust in Indonesia's diverse socio-political environment.

Keywords: *Public trust, governance, procedural legitimacy, religious pluralism, religious policy, social media, Indonesia.*

1. Introduction

Public trust is one of the most central elements sustaining effective governance, especially in societies marked by deep cultural and religious diversity. Without trust, even the most well-intentioned policies risk being misunderstood, resisted, or dismissed by the public. Trust determines whether citizens perceive governmental decisions as legitimate, fair, and aligned with shared national values. In Indonesia—a country where religion remains intertwined with identity, political discourse, and daily social life—understanding how trust is formed and negotiated is particularly important. The Indonesian state recognizes six religions—Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—and presents itself as neutral toward them. Yet, public perceptions of fairness vary significantly depending on local contexts, institutional practices, and evolving social dynamics.

Sabrina et al. (2023) argue that although Indonesia constitutionally upholds religious freedom, its governance practices have long been shaped by majoritarian perspectives, particularly in regions where political decisions are strongly tied to demographic dominance. This creates a persistent tension between constitutional ideals and lived realities. For example, while the right to worship is legally protected, the ease of securing permits for houses of worship frequently varies by region. In some areas, minority communities face administrative delays or social resistance, while in others the process is smooth and predictable. Mazya, Ridho, and Irfani (2024) note that such inconsistencies foster perceptions that inclusivity is unevenly realized, leading communities to question whether the state is truly impartial.

In response to rising concerns over polarization, intolerance, and uneven policy implementation, the Indonesian government has advanced the concept of *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation) as a national framework for managing religious diversity. The Ministry of Religious Affairs defines religious moderation as a policy orientation grounded in four principles—national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and respect for legal norms—intended to promote balanced religious expression and reduce extremism. While the initiative is positioned as a means to strengthen interfaith harmony, public evaluations of its effectiveness depend heavily on perceptions of fairness, transparency, and consistency in

implementation (Kurniawan et al. 2025). Scholars note that the presence of moderation discourse alone is insufficient; citizens assess the credibility of such initiatives through lived experiences with local bureaucracies, enforcement practices, and the government's responsiveness to minority concerns.

Public Trust Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics, particularly in relation to political support and institutional legitimacy (Easton 1965). Scholars such as Tyler (1990; 2006) and Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003) emphasize that institutional trust emerges when citizens perceive public authorities as fair, transparent, and procedurally just. These evaluations shape the legitimacy of state actions and the willingness of citizens to accept governmental decisions. The theory asserts that trust in institutions grows when they demonstrate fairness, honesty, competence, and procedural justice. Li et al. (2024) highlight that in pluralistic societies, perceptions of procedural fairness—how decisions are made, how rules are enforced, and whether diverse groups feel represented—strongly influence institutional legitimacy. This is especially relevant in Indonesia's religious governance, where communities' sense of belonging is tied to whether they feel equally heard, respected, and protected by the state.

The communication environment further shapes these perceptions. Indonesia's media landscape is increasingly dominated by digital communication, with social media functioning as both an informational resource and a site of contestation. Messages about religion and governance circulate rapidly and are often filtered through a fragmented, polarized media ecosystem. Social media enables the government to communicate directly with citizens, counter misinformation, and highlight interfaith collaboration. Yet it also amplifies hoaxes, emotional narratives, and divisive rhetoric. Judijanto, Alfirdaus, and Suharno (2024) illustrate that while religious practices continue to strengthen social cohesion, digital platforms can undermine this cohesion by spreading sensationalized or misleading information that heightens distrust.

Given this complex backdrop, the present study examines how fairness, transparency, representation, and digital communication interact to shape public trust in Indonesia's religious governance. Instead of treating trust as a fixed attribute, this study approaches trust as a dynamic and interpretive process—one shaped by institutional practices, administrative experiences, social interactions, and communicative environments. Through a mixed-methods exploration, this research seeks to understand how Indonesians perceive the state's management of religious affairs, how media environments influence these perceptions, and how trust is strengthened or challenged in everyday life. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on pluralism, governance, and public legitimacy in Indonesia's ever-evolving religious landscape.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between religious governance, institutional trust, and media communication in Indonesia has been widely explored, yet it remains a deeply layered and evolving field of inquiry. Much of the scholarship recognizes that Indonesia's religious landscape is distinguished by its constitutional commitment to pluralism and its historical emphasis on *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). However, these formal ideals exist alongside complex social dynamics, regional disparities, and varied interpretations of religious norms that shape how citizens evaluate state policies and institutional behavior. As such, public trust becomes a negotiated construct—formed not only by what the government claims to uphold but by how communities experience those claims in their daily interactions with institutions, policies, and media.

Mukhibat et al. (2024) emphasize the role of educational institutions in promoting religious moderation and cultural accommodation, highlighting how universities and schools integrate values of tolerance, inclusivity, and conflict prevention into formal curricula and training programs. Their research underscores the significance of Indonesia's "supportive accommodation" model, wherein the state actively encourages peaceful coexistence by embedding inclusive messaging within educational and social institutions. This approach reflects Indonesia's longstanding ideological foundation in *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, a principle that frames diversity as an essential element of national unity rather than a source of division. In this sense, the state's efforts to promote moderation serve as both a normative and practical framework for managing religious diversity.

At the same time, Indonesia's model of religious governance is neither secular nor theocratic; rather, it represents a hybrid approach that legalizes the presence of religion in public life while maintaining formal neutrality among the six recognized faiths. Scholars often refer to this arrangement as "positive accommodation," meaning that the state provides support for religious expression without explicitly privileging one group above others. However, implementing such a model presents various challenges. While legal frameworks aim to protect worship rights and prevent discrimination, public perceptions do not always align with official claims of neutrality. Communities often interpret government behavior through their own lived experiences—such as navigating bureaucratic procedures for worship permits or responding to local religious regulations—which can differ dramatically between regions.

Public trust in government handling of religious matters hinges on whether citizens feel the state is fair to their community. If minority groups perceive that their needs are deprioritized or that the state yields to pressures from majority hardliners, their trust in the government may weaken. This can manifest in various ways, such as restrictive local bylaws that disproportionately affect minority groups, inadequate protection from discrimination, or inconsistent enforcement

of national regulations. Conversely, members of the religious majority may lose trust if they feel the government is not sufficiently safeguarding moral values or is too lenient toward groups they view as deviant or non-mainstream. Such tensions reveal that maintaining trust requires a delicate balance: the government must demonstrate impartiality while also addressing the expectations of a religiously varied population.

Representation plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of fairness. When diverse religious communities see their members included in advisory councils, public office, or decision-making bodies, they interpret this as a signal of governmental commitment to pluralism. Representation provides reassurance that the state considers the interests of all religious groups, not only the majority. Conversely, the absence of such representation can foster feelings of marginalization, leading communities to question the legitimacy of state policies. Representation thus becomes not merely symbolic but instrumental in reinforcing institutional trust.

Empirical research supports these observations. Hartanto et al. (2021), examining public trust during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that perceived religious value—whether policies reflect moral principles such as compassion and justice—significantly influences trust in government. Their findings indicate that trust is strengthened when citizens view government decisions as aligned with the moral and ethical expectations embedded within their faith traditions. This suggests that in Indonesia, questions of policy legitimacy are often filtered through a moral lens. Policies regarding religious gatherings, minority rights, or freedom of worship, for example, are assessed not only for their practical effects but for their perceived alignment with religious and ethical norms.

Media communication further complicates these dynamics. With the rise of online platforms and digital channels, citizens now receive information directly from government institutions as well as from influencers, journalists, religious leaders, and anonymous social media users. Genda (2025) finds that citizens who regularly consume information from official government social media accounts perceive the state as more transparent, due to the perceived clarity and immediacy of communication. When agencies explain policies directly—such as decisions regarding religious holiday regulations or the organization of interfaith events—they reduce the risk of misinterpretation and enhance trust.

However, digital platforms are also known for amplifying misinformation, sensationalism, and polarization, particularly on sensitive religious issues. Palau-Sampio and López-García (2025) argue that traditional media's authority has declined amid digitalization and the rapid spread of disinformation, placing pressure on governments to regulate online information while maintaining transparency. The erosion of traditional gatekeeping functions exposes the public to fragmented and often contradictory narratives, making it challenging for citizens to assess the legitimacy of government actions.

Barandiarán, Canel, and Bouckaert (2023) highlight the importance of collaborative governance practices grounded in open communication. Their review of participatory governance models, including the Etorkizuna Eraikiz initiative, demonstrates that trust grows when citizens, civil society actors, and government institutions engage in mutual listening and deliberation. In Indonesia, interfaith forums, community dialogues, and youth-led religious initiatives play similar roles in reinforcing social cohesion. These platforms allow citizens to encounter diverse perspectives, reduce prejudices, and build shared understandings of national identity.

Peruško, Lauk, and Harro-Loit (2024) further argue that effective public deliberation requires media systems that prioritize argument-based communication rather than sensationalist or divisive content. In contexts where religious issues are sensitive, the quality of media discourse can significantly influence perceptions of government action. If media portray religious policies as partisan or inconsistent, public trust can weaken. Conversely, media that emphasize fairness, transparency, and dialogue can reinforce the legitimacy of governmental decisions.

Taken together, these studies suggest that public trust in religious governance is shaped by more than policy content. Fairness, representation, communication, and media framing all play important roles in shaping how citizens interpret government action. Transparent procedures and inclusive representation strengthen legitimacy, while inconsistencies, selective enforcement, or negative media portrayals can erode confidence. Furthermore, as citizens increasingly rely on digital platforms for information, the line between governance and communication narrows. The state's ability to maintain trust now depends not only on what it does but on how effectively it explains and contextualizes its actions within a competitive and volatile information environment.

The literature suggests that transparent and responsive governance, inclusive representation, and accurate media communication are vital in cultivating public trust. These insights provide a foundation for examining how Indonesian citizens interpret fairness, media discourse, and institutional behavior in religious matters—an inquiry that this study takes up through its mixed-methods approach.

In conclusion, this study aims to address key gaps in scholarship on Indonesia's religious governance. Existing research discusses pluralism, moderation, and media discourse, but rarely examines how fairness, procedural legitimacy, and social media use interact to shape public trust. Empirical work capturing citizens' lived experiences, including inconsistent worship permits and digital polarization, is also limited. Social media is often treated too simplistically, without comparing its influence to perceptions of fair governance. To bridge these gaps, this study applies a mixed-methods design that measures the effects of fairness and social media while also exploring the emotional and experiential dimensions of trust. Through this approach, the research seeks to offer a holistic understanding of

how Indonesians perceive religious governance and to identify practices that can meaningfully strengthen public trust.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Indonesian citizens perceive government fairness, procedural legitimacy, social media communication, and overall trust in the management of religious affairs. Given the complexity of religious governance and the interpretive nature of trust, a single methodological approach would have been insufficient. The mixed-methods design allows the study to integrate measurable patterns with deeper, narrative insights, combining the strengths of quantitative analysis—useful for identifying broad trends—and qualitative reflections, which reveal nuance, personal experience, and interpretive depth.

3.1. Research Design

The study used an exploratory mixed-methods design, with quantitative and qualitative components functioning in complementary ways. The quantitative component served to identify patterns, general tendencies, and correlations among the key areas of fairness, procedural legitimacy, social media use, and public trust. Quantitative analysis was particularly useful in determining the relative strength of each factor in shaping trust perceptions and in assessing whether fairness or social media influence plays a more dominant role in how respondents judge the state's management of religious issues. Meanwhile, the qualitative component added interpretive richness by allowing respondents to express experiences, feelings, and concerns that cannot be fully captured through structured rating scales.

The combination of these two components reflects the nature of the research problem: trust is not merely a measurable attitude but a lived and contextualized experience. Within Indonesia's diverse religious landscape, trust is shaped not only by institutional behavior but by personal encounters with bureaucracy, community interactions, digital narratives, and broader socio-cultural expectations. The mixed-methods design thus aligns with the study's aim to examine trust from both structural and experiential perspectives.

3.2. Research Instrument

Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire that included both close-ended and open-ended questions. The instrument was divided into five sections to capture the multidimensional nature of trust and religious governance: demographic identity, perceptions of fairness and procedural legitimacy, social

media use, perceptions of social media influence, and overall levels of public trust. This structure ensured that each conceptual dimension of the study was addressed systematically while still leaving room for respondents to articulate personal experiences or concerns.

Most items measuring fairness, procedural legitimacy, social media influence, and public trust employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The Likert format enabled consistent quantitative measurement and allowed for subsequent analysis using SPSS. These close-ended items captured general perceptions regarding government action, social media exposure, and institutional credibility. However, to complement these structured responses, three open-ended questions were included to invite deeper reflections. These questions encouraged respondents to describe personal experiences with fairness or unfairness, perceptions of media influence, and suggestions for improving trust. The qualitative responses were later analyzed thematically, enabling the study to interpret the subtler dimensions of trust formation.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants. This method was considered appropriate due to the sensitive nature of religious and political topics in Indonesia and the need for representation across religious communities, regions, and demographic backgrounds. A total of 150 participants were targeted, providing a dataset that was sufficiently large for meaningful statistical analysis while also manageable for qualitative coding. Purposive sampling allowed the research team to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, religion, region, and ethnicity—factors that are often significant in shaping perceptions of religious governance.

The questionnaire was distributed through online platforms, primarily using Google Forms. The link was shared across social media channels, WhatsApp groups, and email networks, enabling wide and flexible access. Respondents received an informed consent statement explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and assurances of confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were used solely for academic purposes. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the data collection process, particularly given the emotional and political sensitivity of religious issues.

Data collection took place over approximately three to four weeks. During this period, responses were monitored to ensure balanced demographic representation. Follow-up reminders were sent to increase participation among underrepresented groups, particularly religious minorities and respondents from regions outside Java. Before analysis, all responses were reviewed for completeness. This careful procedure ensured that the final dataset reflected both demographic diversity and substantive accuracy.

Below is a reconstruction of the questionnaire structure to provide clarity on the research instrument:

Table 1. Structure of the Questionnaire

Section	Variable/Focus Area	Number of Items	Type of Question	Scale Used
Respondent Identity (Demographics)	Age, gender, religion, region	7	Close-ended + open-ended	Multiple choice + open narrative
Fairness and Procedural Legitimacy (X1)	Perceptions of fairness, transparency, equal treatment	5	Close-ended	5-point Likert
Social Media Use and Influence (X2)	Frequency, type, and perceived impact of social media	5	Close-ended	5-point Likert
Public Trust (Y)	Confidence in government institutions and religious governance	5	Close-ended	5-point Likert
Social Media Influence (Qualitative)	Reflections, concerns, suggestions	2	Open-ended	Narrative

3.3. Respondent Profile

The respondents' demographics reflect an intentional effort to capture Indonesia's social diversity. Equal gender representation was achieved with 75 male respondents (50%) and 75 female respondents (50%). Respondents aged 25–34 made up the largest share of the sample (49%), representing individuals who are generally active in the workforce and digitally connected.

In terms of religion, 103 respondents were Muslim (68%), which reflects Indonesia's national demographic composition. The sample also included Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians, ensuring that multiple religious perspectives were represented. Respondents also came from a range of geographic backgrounds. The largest share resided in Java (69%), followed by participants from Bali (11%), Sumatra (3%), Sulawesi (3%), Jakarta (4%), and Kalimantan (3%), with the remaining respondents coming from other regions across Indonesia (7%). This geographic spread ensures that the study captures perspectives from multiple parts of the country.

Table 2. Respondent Profile

Category	n	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	75	50
Female	75	50
Age		
18–24 years old	19	13
25–34 years old	74	49
35–44 years old	39	26
45–54 years old	15	10
55+ years old	3	2
Religion		
Islam	103	68
Protestant	7	5
Catholic	10	7
Buddhist	7	5
Hindu	15	10
Confucian	8	5
Geographic		
Java	104	69
Bali	16	11
Sumatra	4	3
Sulawesi	4	3
Jakarta	7	4
Kalimantan	4	3
Other region	11	7

4. Results

The findings of this research combine quantitative evidence with qualitative insights to provide a multifaceted understanding of how Indonesian citizens interpret the government's role in managing religious affairs. The quantitative component reveals broad attitudinal patterns and the strength of associations between key variables, while the qualitative responses illuminate the more nuanced, emotional, and experiential dimensions of trust, fairness, and media influence. Together, these findings offer a holistic portrait of how trust is shaped within Indonesia's complex religious environment.

4.1. Quantitative Results

Quantitative analysis focused on three primary variables: fairness and procedural legitimacy (X1), social media use and influence (X2), and public trust (Y). The statistical results demonstrate clear relationships between these variables, particularly highlighting the significant role of fairness in shaping trust.

Table 3. Regression Results affect Public Trust

Variable	Mean	B	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
Fairness and Procedural Legitimacy (X1)	3.81	0.904			
Social Media Use and Influence (X2)	3.44	0.264			
Public Trust (Y)	3.72	**-3.180**	**0.708**	**0.704**	**3.081**

Interpretation of Findings

Fairness and procedural legitimacy emerged as the strongest predictor of public trust, with a regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.904$, indicating a very strong positive association. This means that respondents who perceive government processes as fair, transparent, and consistent are significantly more likely to trust the government's handling of religious matters. The mean score of 3.81 shows that respondents generally view fairness positively but still identify areas for improvement.

Social media use and influence yielded a positive yet more moderate correlation with trust ($\beta = 0.264$). With a mean of 3.44, respondents show moderate agreement that social media plays a role in shaping their perceptions. This finding suggests that social media has the power to strengthen or weaken trust, depending on the nature and quality of information circulating online.

The dependent variable, public trust, recorded a mean of 3.72, indicating a relatively high level of confidence in governmental religious governance despite ongoing concerns. The regression coefficient of public trust ($\beta = -3.180$) indicates that the constant has a negative coefficient. This suggests that when all independent variables are held at zero, the baseline level of Public Trust (Y) is already positioned in the negative range. In practical terms, this means that in the absence of Fairness and Procedural Legitimacy, as well as without the effects of Social Media Use and Social Media Influence, public trust would naturally be very low. The negative constant highlights that these factors are not merely supportive but fundamentally necessary in elevating trust to a positive and meaningful level. The R Square value of 0.708 shows that approximately 70.8% of the variance in Public Trust can be explained by the combined effect of the two independent variables. This suggests that the model is highly effective in capturing the key factors influencing public trust. The model's Adjusted R^2 value of 0.704 indicates that fairness and social media influence together account for approximately 70.4% of the

variance in public trust. The Adjusted R Square value further confirms the robustness of the model, indicating only minimal adjustment after accounting for sample size and number of predictors. This is a remarkably high figure, suggesting that nearly three-quarters of trust can be explained by perceptions of fair governance and media communication. The remaining 29.6% may be influenced by additional factors such as personal experiences with officials, interpersonal networks, economic conditions, or political climate.

Meanwhile, the standard error of the estimate (3.081) provides an indication of the average distance between observed and predicted values, reflecting a reasonable level of accuracy for social science research. Overall, the results show that both predictors contribute substantially to explaining variations in public trust.

These results reaffirm the central role of fairness in public trust, aligning with the theoretical foundations of Public Trust Theory. While social media plays an important supporting role, it does not outweigh the significance of institutional behavior. Fairness expressed through transparency, predictability, and equality of treatment remains the primary driver of trust within Indonesia's religious governance.

4.2. Qualitative Results

The qualitative responses enrich the quantitative findings by capturing respondents' personal reflections, frustrations, hopes, and lived experiences. The open-ended questions allowed participants to articulate their views in their own words, revealing a more textured understanding of how trust is formed or eroded in daily life. Several prominent themes emerged, each contributing to the broader narrative of how citizens interpret fairness, representation, social media influence, and the role of the state.

Table 4. Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	% of Responses	Key Points	Illustrative Examples
Fairness and Equal Treatment	25.3% (38/150)	Transparent processes, equal application of laws	"When processes are transparent and predictable, I feel trust. But favoritism makes us lose confidence."
Dialogue and Interfaith Collaboration	21.3% (32/150)	Importance of consistent interfaith forums	"Interfaith events help us see each other as equals, but they must be consistent, not just ceremonial."

Education for Tolerance	16.7% (25/150)	Need for tolerance and digital literacy in curriculum	"Schools should not only teach religion but also how to live together and respect differences."
Freedom of Worship	13.3% (20/150)	Challenges in obtaining permits, protection from disruption	"Our community struggles to get permits for worship. Government action here is what builds or breaks trust."
Representation & Inclusion	10% (15/150)	Presence of minority voices in policymaking	"Seeing minorities in decision-making shows the government respects us."
Social Media – Negative Influence	48% (72/150)	Hoaxes, politicization, viral scandals	"Government only reacts after issues go viral, which reduces confidence."
Social Media – Positive Influence	38.7% (58/150)	Solidarity stories, moderate influencers	"Videos of Muslims guarding Buddhist temples made me believe harmony is still possible."
Social Media – Mixed Views	13.3% (20/150)	Digital literacy needed	"Social media can unite or divide. Digital literacy is essential."

Theme 1: Fairness and equal treatment (25.3% of responses)

The most prominent theme, voiced by 38 respondents, centers on the expectation of fairness. Respondents frequently expressed that trust is contingent on transparent and predictable procedures, particularly in matters such as worship permits, local regulations, and the state's response to communal tensions. Minority respondents emphasized that inconsistent enforcement of laws or bureaucracy that favors majority groups undermines their confidence in state neutrality. This theme reinforces the quantitative finding that fairness is the strongest determinant of trust.

Theme 2: Dialogue and interfaith collaboration (21.3% of responses)

Many respondents highlighted the positive impact of interfaith activities, community forums, and youth-led dialogues. However, they noted that such initiatives must be ongoing rather than symbolic. Respondents expressed a desire for deeper and more sustained efforts that address real issues, rather than events that appear to be ceremonial or event-driven.

Theme 3: Education for tolerance (16.7% of responses)

Respondents emphasized education as a long-term foundation for cultivating tolerance. They stressed the importance of integrating digital literacy into religious and civic education, arguing that young people must learn to navigate misinformation and online polarization. Schools, they noted, should instill empathy, coexistence, and critical thinking from an early age.

Theme 4: Freedom of worship (13.3% of responses)

Challenges in obtaining worship permits or facing interruptions to religious gatherings were recurring concerns, especially among minority respondents. These experiences directly shaped trust: when the government protected worship rights decisively, trust increased; when the state appeared passive, trust diminished.

Theme 5: Representation and inclusion (10% of responses)

Respondents argued that representation—having diverse religious communities in formal decision-making—signals respect and recognition. Lack of representation was seen as contributing to feelings of exclusion or neglect.

Theme 6: Social media's negative influence (48% of responses)

Nearly half of all respondents expressed frustration with the prevalence of misinformation, doctored videos, sectarian narratives, and politicization of religious issues online. Viral scandals involving religious institutions or government missteps were described as damaging to trust.

Theme 7: Social media's positive influence (38.7% of responses)

Despite its risks, social media was also seen as a platform for hopeful narratives, particularly interfaith solidarity and moderate religious voices. Respondents cited examples of peaceful cooperation and online campaigns promoting tolerance.

Theme 8: Mixed perspectives on social media (13.3% of responses)

Some respondents described social media as a "two-edged sword," calling for stronger digital literacy and more responsible public communication from both government and civil society.

5. Discussion

The findings show that trust is strongly driven by perceptions of fair and consistent institutional behavior, while social media plays a secondary yet meaningful role in shaping public interpretation. Together, the results highlight how Indonesians form trust through both lived experiences and the broader digital environment.

5.1. Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study show that fairness and procedural legitimacy are the most influential factors shaping public trust in Indonesia's religious governance. Quantitative analysis reveals that perceptions of fair treatment, transparency, and consistent enforcement strongly predict trust levels, far more than social media exposure alone. This suggests that Indonesians judge the credibility of religious governance primarily through institutional behavior rather than digital narratives. The qualitative responses reinforce this pattern, with many participants describing trust as something built through direct experience with state procedures, such as the ease or difficulty of securing worship permits or the responsiveness of authorities during interfaith tensions. Social media still plays a meaningful but secondary role, functioning as a channel that can either strengthen confidence through positive narratives or erode it through misinformation and viral conflict. Together, the results indicate that trust is shaped through an interplay of lived experiences, institutional performance, and mediated communication, but fairness remains the most decisive and stable predictor.

5.2. Theoretical Contribution

This research extends Public Trust Theory by demonstrating how trust in a pluralistic religious context is both procedural and experiential. While classical formulations emphasize fairness, justice, and legitimacy as abstract principles, the findings of this study show that citizens interpret these principles through tangible, everyday encounters with bureaucracy and local governance. The results also add nuance to the theory by highlighting the role of digital environments as trust mediators. Instead of viewing social media simply as a communication channel, the study illustrates how online narratives shape emotional responses, amplify perceptions of bias, and intensify reactions to perceived unfairness. This demonstrates that trust in modern governance cannot be understood fully without

accounting for the digital ecosystem that frames public interpretation. By integrating fairness, representation, and digital communication into a single analytical model, the study contributes a more context-sensitive and contemporary interpretation of Public Trust Theory, particularly within religiously diverse societies such as Indonesia.

5.3. Explanation of Patterns

Several social and structural factors help explain the patterns observed in the findings. The strong influence of fairness reflects Indonesia's long-standing sensitivity to unequal treatment across religious communities, where experiences of selective enforcement or delayed worship permits directly inform perceptions of state impartiality. Respondents' emphasis on representation suggests that trust grows when minority groups see themselves included in decision-making bodies, reflecting a desire for recognition and equal citizenship. The mixed role of social media is explained by the fragmented digital environment, where narratives of interfaith solidarity coexist with misinformation and sectarian sentiment. Positive stories build reassurance, while negative viral content deepens suspicion, especially when institutional responses are slow or unclear. These patterns collectively show that trust is formed through both concrete institutional behavior and the broader communicative climate that shapes how citizens interpret those actions. The interplay of these factors illustrates why trust in religious governance remains fragile and highly dependent on the consistency and clarity of government practices.

5.4. Implications

The findings of this study provide important insights for governance, communication strategy, and academic research. The strong influence of fairness and procedural legitimacy shows that governments must ensure transparent, predictable, and consistently applied policies in managing religious affairs. Clear processes for worship permits, equitable resource allocation, and firm action against discrimination are essential to maintaining institutional credibility, especially for minority communities.

The results also highlight the dual nature of social media. Digital platforms can strengthen trust by increasing transparency and showcasing interfaith cooperation, yet they also amplify misinformation and polarization. Government agencies therefore need proactive, culturally aware communication strategies, supported by digital literacy and effective narrative framing. Collaborating with moderate religious leaders, influencers, and civil society groups can improve message reach and credibility.

The study further underscores the value of interfaith education and public representation. Schools, universities, and community organizations play an important role in building tolerance and promoting digital and civic awareness.

Ensuring diverse representation in advisory bodies and decision-making structures signals inclusivity and strengthens public trust.

Overall, the implications point to one central insight: trust is strengthened when governance is fair and communication is clear, responsive, and inclusive. These principles are essential for sustaining social cohesion and supporting Indonesia's pluralistic democracy.

6. Closing Remarks

When government policies are implemented impartially, transparently, and consistently across regions and religious communities, citizens feel recognized, protected, and respected. Conversely, when favoritism, inconsistency, or selective enforcement is perceived—particularly among minority groups—trust diminishes quickly, revealing how fragile and experiential trust can be.

Social media adds another layer of complexity to this dynamic. While the quantitative results indicate that its influence is secondary to fairness, the qualitative narratives reveal that digital platforms amplify both constructive and damaging perceptions. Positive stories of tolerance, interfaith cooperation, and responsive institutions help build confidence, whereas misinformation, polarization, and sensational religious content intensify doubt. This duality demonstrates that trust in the digital era is shaped not only by government performance but also by the broader media environment. Effective governance therefore requires not only fair and consistent practices but also clear, timely, and empathetic communication—particularly in online spaces where narratives shift rapidly.

Representation also plays a critical role in reinforcing legitimacy. When diverse religious communities are visibly included in decision-making bodies or advisory councils, citizens interpret this as a genuine commitment to equality. Representation does not merely symbolize pluralism; it institutionalizes it, reassuring the public that state institutions protect the rights of all groups. Alongside representation, interfaith dialogue and educational programs emerge as long-term investments in social cohesion. These initiatives cultivate empathy, reduce prejudice, and equip citizens—especially younger generations—with the social and digital literacy needed to navigate complex religious and media environments.

Taken together, these insights underscore that trust in religious governance is shaped by more than policy design alone. It is cultivated through a combination of fair institutional behavior, inclusive representation, lived citizen experiences, and responsible communication. As Indonesia continues to navigate religious diversity, decentralization, and rapid digital transformation, sustaining trust will require ongoing commitment to transparency, equity, and proactive engagement. Ultimately, when citizens feel equally protected and genuinely acknowledged,

trust flourishes—supporting effective governance and strengthening Indonesia's broader social fabric.

Statements and Declaration

The authors used AI tools solely for language refinement, preliminary data organization, and bibliographic formatting. All analyses, interpretations, and theoretical arguments were developed independently by the authors. These uses comply with the journal's AI policy, and no AI systems contributed to the study's empirical findings or conceptual insights. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

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BOOK REVIEWS

DOI: 10.62461/JNM010126

Anthony Le Duc. *Buddhist Environmental Humanism: Doing Good for Self and Others.* UK, Ethics Press, 2025. ISBN 978-1-83711-112-1, 259 pp.

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1. Introduction

In an era marked by deepening ecological crises, environmental ethics has increasingly become a vital field of inquiry, stretching across disciplines, cultures, and belief systems. Yet, as debates about climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation intensify, a critical question remains: Can personal moral transformation be as important as technological innovation and policy reform in saving the planet?

In *Buddhist Environmental Humanism*, Anthony Le Duc offers a compelling and timely response. Grounded in the moral framework of Theravāda Buddhism, the book proposes that true environmental sustainability requires not only systemic change but a radical shift in human consciousness. Through the lens of "Buddhist environmental humanism," Le Duc argues that the cultivation of inner virtues, mindfulness, compassion, generosity, and ethical responsibility can transform how individuals and societies relate to the natural world.

This review explores the book's central argument, thematic range, evidentiary basis, structure, and intellectual significance. It concludes by reflecting on the author's unique perspective and the broader relevance of his work in today's environmental discourse.

2. Moral Self-Cultivation as the Heart of Ecological Ethics

At the core of Le Duc's argument is a bold and refreshing thesis: that the environmental catastrophe confronting humanity is fundamentally a spiritual and ethical crisis. Drawing on classical Buddhist concepts, especially the "three poisons" of greed, hatred, and delusion, he asserts that ecological destruction stems from moral failings that cannot be resolved through policy or science alone.

Instead, Le Duc contends that a path to sustainability must begin with the transformation of the self.

His proposed model of "Buddhist environmental humanism" bridges the gap between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches. Unlike deep ecology, which may downplay human agency in favor of nature's intrinsic value, Le Duc centers the human person not as master over nature, but as a morally responsible being embedded in an interdependent world. The clarity of this thesis and the coherence with which it is developed across the book's chapters mark it as a significant contribution to both Buddhist and environmental ethical thought.

3. Scope, Depth, and Methodological Rigor

Le Duc's exploration covers wide terrain, doctrinally, philosophically, and ethically. The book is structured into twelve chapters, methodically moving from diagnosis to ethical prescription. Early chapters outline the spiritual roots of the ecological crisis, while later chapters propose a Buddhist response grounded in interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and virtue ethics.

The author's approach is both analytical and normative. He neither imposes Buddhist views dogmatically nor romanticizes them as inherently eco-friendly. Instead, he critically engages Buddhist texts, examines their limitations, and offers a reinterpretation suited for the modern ecological context. His writing reveals both fidelity to tradition and an innovative moral imagination. The text's careful structure, beginning with analysis and culminating in a constructive ethical framework, makes it intellectually satisfying and pedagogically effective.

4. Evidence and Interdisciplinary Engagement

To support his argument, Le Duc draws on a robust mix of sources. He skillfully weaves classical Buddhist texts with contemporary scholarship in environmental ethics, political ecology, and religious studies. Thinkers such as Ian Harris, Joanna Macy, Bryan Norton, and Pope Francis (via *Laudato Si'*) appear in dialogue with Buddhist teachings, enriching the book's interdisciplinary breadth.

The real-world implications of Le Duc's arguments are not ignored. He references environmental disasters in Southeast Asia, such as flooding in Thailand, and highlights Buddhist ecological actions like tree ordination ceremonies and monastic conservation efforts. These examples, though brief, demonstrate the living relevance of Buddhist ethics in addressing real ecological challenges. While additional ethnographic material could have further grounded his theory in practice, the philosophical rigor and range of examples lend the work persuasive authority.

5. The Flow of Ideas and Internal Coherence

The book's structure mirrors the ethical journey it advocates. From the recognition of suffering (environmental and spiritual), to the identification of its causes, to the envisioning of a path forward, *Buddhist Environmental Humanism* follows a narrative arc not unlike the Four Noble Truths.

Each chapter builds organically on the last, offering readers both conceptual clarity and progressive insight. For instance, the shift from discussing Buddhist understandings of suffering to notions of ecological responsibility, solidarity, and mutual service unfolds naturally, allowing the moral framework to take shape with elegance and depth. The flow is logical, and the argument is increasingly persuasive as the reader moves through the text.

6. Critical Reflections and Constructive Contributions

Le Duc's work stands out in its ability to bridge abstract theory and lived ethical concern. The book resonates with contemporary spiritual calls for ecological conversion, akin to those in *Laudato Si'*, but offers a distinctively Buddhist voice focused on personal virtue and mindful living.

Yet, some limitations are worth noting. The book emphasizes inner transformation but gives limited attention to how Buddhist ethics might inform environmental policy, institutional reform, or international law. In an age when structural and global action is necessary, the role of spiritual ethics must also connect with systemic change. Nevertheless, Le Duc's focus on the inner life is a vital and often underappreciated component of sustainable action. In this way, his contribution is not so much a final answer as it is an invitation to deepen the conversation.

7. Authorial Background and Intellectual Perspective

Anthony Le Duc brings a unique background to this project. A Vietnamese Catholic priest and theologian based in Thailand, Le Duc's interreligious and intercultural experience enriches his reading of Buddhism and ecology. He writes not from a place of romanticism or detachment but from deep engagement, academically, spiritually, and pastorally.

His position allows him to offer both a sympathetic critique and a constructive reinterpretation of Buddhist traditions. His prior scholarship on religion and ecology, particularly in Southeast Asia, provides a solid foundation upon which this work builds. This blend of scholarship and lived perspective gives the book a rare authenticity.

8. Framing within Genre and Discipline

Buddhist Environmental Humanism is best understood as a contribution to religious environmental ethics. It speaks clearly to scholars of Buddhist studies, moral philosophy, religious ethics, and sustainability studies. While the book is accessible to a broader audience, its core strength lies in its ability to advance academic discourse while remaining spiritually and ethically grounded.

Le Duc avoids doctrinal rigidity or speculative theology. Instead, he remains focused on values, virtues, and practices that can cultivate a deeper sense of ecological belonging. His work aligns with others in the eco-philosophical and spiritual ecology fields, yet its emphasis on the transformative power of Buddhist moral psychology offers something distinct and necessary.

9. Contemporary Relevance and Lasting Value

As ecological despair grows, many people are searching for frameworks that do more than inform; they want to be transformed. Le Duc's book offers precisely this: not a quick solution to environmental problems, but a long, steady path of ethical awakening. His call to reimagine our relationship with the Earth through inner transformation is both deeply traditional and radically contemporary.

His vision aligns with many indigenous, Christian, and interfaith perspectives, making the book a valuable resource in dialogues that cross cultural and religious boundaries. Whether one is Buddhist or not, the invitation to live with compassion, mindfulness, and simplicity is universally resonant.

10. Conclusion: A Vital Contribution to Ecological Ethics

Buddhist Environmental Humanism is more than an academic text; it is a moral call. In lucid prose and well-reasoned argumentation, Anthony Le Duc reminds us that the solution to our ecological crises does not lie solely in the realm of politics, economics, or science. Rather, it lies equally in the domain of ethics, spirituality, and character formation.

By placing Buddhist virtue ethics at the heart of his environmental vision, Le Duc revitalizes ancient wisdom for a modern, imperiled world. His book challenges us to reimagine environmentalism not as external activism alone, but as internal transformation rooted in compassion and responsibility.

This work is essential reading for scholars, activists, educators, and spiritually engaged citizens concerned about the future of our planet. It offers not only critique but a constructive path forward, one that recognizes that healing the Earth begins with healing ourselves.

CONFERENCE REPORT

15th International Roundtable on Media and Religion & Spirituality in Asia

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1. Introduction

The 15th International Roundtable organized by the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) and the Department of Peace Studies, International College, Payap University, was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 1–2 November 2025. With the theme *"The Media and Religion & Spirituality in Asia"*, the conference convened scholars, practitioners, and activists from across Asia and beyond to explore the intersections of media, religion, and spirituality in contemporary society. The event combined plenary sessions, panel discussions, and parallel roundtables, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives on how media technologies shape religious practices, public scholarship, and social justice.

The conference began with an interfaith ritual, cultural performances, and welcome remarks from representatives of Payap University and ARC. Rev. Dr. Kenneth Dobson, Dr. Le Ngoc Bich Ly, and Ms. Phyllis Mann emphasized the importance of dialogue across traditions. At the same time, Dr. Anthony Le Duc highlighted the Center's mission of fostering communication and collaboration in Asia. The ceremony set a tone of inclusivity and intercultural exchange, underscoring the conference's commitment to advancing peace and understanding.

2. Keynote Address: Charismatic Technologies and Religious Affordances

Dr. Heidi A. Campbell, Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University and Visiting Professor at NUS-Singapore, delivered the keynote lecture on *"Charismatic Technologies and Religious Affordances: Cross-Religious Reflections on AI and GPTs and the Asian Context."* Drawing on affordance theory, Dr. Campbell examined how Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPTs) embody both technological

and religious affordances, enabling ritual, scriptural engagement, and personalized spiritual dialogue across Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim contexts.

She critiqued the rise of "technological clergy" who promote AI without fully considering its impact on human experience, urging scholars to adopt a middle ground that critically evaluates both tensions and possibilities. Campbell's analysis of over 100 religious apps revealed strategies of replication, mediation, and transformation, highlighting how charismatic technologies can democratize access to sacred texts while raising ethical questions about authenticity, authority, and community. Her call to reframe religion and technology as collaborators rather than competitors resonated strongly with participants, situating Asia as a vital site for comparative research on digital spirituality.

3. Panel Discussion: Religion, Media, and Public Scholarship for Social Justice

The panel organized by the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice featured Dr. Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans, Dr. Sarojini Nadar, and Dr. Thandi Gamedze. Their dialogue foregrounded the ethical and liberative dimensions of engaging media for public scholarship.

- **Dr. Scharnick-Udemans** emphasized the co-construction of meaning by media and religion, advocating for media literacy as a theological imperative. She warned against the commodification of religious symbols and stressed the need to challenge hierarchies embedded in media systems.
- **Dr. Nadar** reflected on her journey as an African feminist scholar, citing Edward Said's notion of the public intellectual. She shared experiences of using radio, television, and opinion writing to confront gender-based violence and religious patriarchy, reminding scholars to speak on issues that disturb them, echoing Archbishop Tutu's advice.
- **Dr. Gamedze** introduced *Freedom Theology South Africa*, a bingo-inspired educational game narrating the church's resistance to apartheid. She highlighted the pedagogical power of games and traditional media in fostering critical consciousness and historical memory.

Together, the panelists underscored that public scholarship is not merely about visibility but accountability to communities. Their insights bridged African and Asian contexts, reinforcing the conference's transnational ethos.

4. Parallel Roundtables

The heart of the conference lay in its parallel sessions, which showcased diverse research across themes of digital faith, AI and spirituality, media ecology, hermeneutics, feminist theology, and cultural studies.

4.1. Digital Faith and Online Evangelization

Papers explored the transformative role of digital media in mobilizing Filipino Catholics, the feasibility of virtual parishes, and the creative adaptation of religious icons into memes. Discussions highlighted both the power and perils of digital evangelization, emphasizing the need for discernment in balancing tradition with innovation.

4.2. AI, Technology, and Spirituality

Scholars examined theological experiments with AI, reflections on Asian spirituality, and the role of video games in religious engagement. The session revealed how digital narratives and algorithmic logics reshape religious discourse, while raising questions about authenticity and pastoral care in AI-mediated contexts.

4.3. Media, Ecology, and Social Ethics

This roundtable included papers on green media's influence on environmental narratives, Buddhist peace education in Myanmar, and Catholic online preaching in the Philippines. The discussions emphasized the ethical responsibilities of media in addressing ecological crises and promoting social justice.

4.4. Texts, Theology, and Digital Hermeneutics

Participants analyzed biblical interpretation in digital contexts, postcolonial exegesis, and streaming as public pedagogy. The session underscored how digital hermeneutics challenge traditional authority structures while opening new spaces for epistemic freedom.

4.5. Gender, Power, and Feminist Theologies

Papers critiqued patriarchal authority on social media, examined Christian Zionist media statements, and explored decolonial approaches to biblical texts. The roundtable highlighted feminist theology's role in exposing systemic injustices and reimagining inclusive communities.

4.6. Asian Culture, Religion, and Film

Presentations analyzed anime adaptations, Vietnamese mediumship practices, and the digital ritualization of grief following Pope Francis's death. These studies illustrated how film and media serve as sites of negotiation between tradition, modernity, and spirituality.

4.7. Religion, Community, and the Public Sphere

This session examined media's role in shaping communal narratives, from critiques of masculine religious authority to explorations of trust and tensions in Indonesia's religious landscape. The discussions reinforced the importance of media as a public sphere for theological and ethical reflection.

4.8. Emerging Themes

Across sessions, several themes emerged:

- **Media as a site of liberation and contestation**. Scholars emphasized the dual role of media in reproducing hierarchies and enabling resistance.
- **AI and charismatic technologies**. The integration of GPTs and religious apps highlighted both opportunities for democratization and risks of alienation.
- **Public scholarship and accountability**. Participants stressed that visibility must be coupled with responsibility to communities.
- **Intercultural and transnational dialogue**. The conference fostered exchanges across African, Asian, and Western contexts, enriching comparative perspectives.
- **Ethics of representation**. Questions of authenticity, misrepresentation, and epistemic justice permeated discussions, urging scholars to remain critically engaged.

5. Conclusion

The 15th International Roundtable demonstrated the vitality of scholarly engagement at the intersection of media, religion, and spirituality in Asia. By bringing together diverse voices, the conference illuminated how digital technologies are reshaping religious practices, public scholarship, and social justice movements. The keynote and panel sessions provided conceptual anchors, while the parallel roundtables showcased the breadth of ongoing research. Ultimately, the event affirmed that knowledge must not only interpret the world but also participate in its transformation, echoing the prophetic call for scholarship that is both critical and courageous.

CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

Keynote

Charismatic Technologies and Religious Affordances: Cross-Religious Reflections on AI and GPTs and the Asian Context

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This presentation explores the intersection of artificial intelligence and religion through the lens of "charismatic technology," a concept that positions technology as a mediating force with spiritual resonance. Drawing on affordance theory, it examines how Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPTs) embody both technological and religious affordances—facilitating ritual, scriptural engagement, and personalized spiritual dialogue across Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim contexts. Through cross-religious content analysis of Religious GPTs, this study reveals how these AI tools replicate, mediate, and transform religious practices, offering new modes of accessibility, interactivity, and pluralistic engagement. It critiques the dominant role of the "technological clergy" and calls for deeper reflection on the religious affordances of AI design. By situating GPTs within Asian sociotechnical imaginaries, the presentation highlights the need for comparative, culturally grounded research on AI's role in shaping spiritual life, authority, and community. Ultimately, it advocates for ethically attuned, cross-religious dialogue in emerging tech development.

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Panel

Religion, Media, and Public Scholarship for Social Justice

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The Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice takes a broad and generative approach to the conceptualisation of scholarly engagement with religion and media, and to its study as intertwined fields of intellectual and public inquiry. The Centre's research and teaching are organised across five intersecting focus areas: Religion, Gender, and Sexuality; Religion, Ecology, and Economy; Religion and Media; Religion, Race, Politics, and African Religions; and Religion, Education, and Epistemology.What brings us together, as individual scholars and as a collective, is our shared commitment to research and teaching that serve the struggle for social justice in all its forms including gender

justice, racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, and epistemic justice. We hold two mottos close "Advancing Knowledge, Advancing Justice" and "Critical Scholarship, Courageous Action".

The Centre's work continually explores the dynamic relationship between public pedagogy and public scholarship recognising that knowledge production is not confined to the academy, but is co-created through critical engagement with communities, media, and other public platforms. This commitment reflects our contention that scholarship must not only interpret the world but also actively participate in its transformation. It is within this vision of engaged, decolonial, feminist and dialogical scholarship that we situate our new partnership with the Asian Research Centre for Religion and Social Communication (ARC).

In this panel presentation, Senior Researcher and Associate Professor Lee Scharnick-Udemans reflects on how the Centre has foregrounded the study of religion and media as an integral part of its research agenda, and why this focus is essential to its pursuit of social justice through scholarship. Drawing on her work within the critical discursive tradition, Scharnick-Udemans explains how religious diversity,though constitutionally protected and rhetorically celebrated, remains structured by profound inequalities of power and visibility and that these are produced and sustained through political economies of religion and media.In doing so, she will show how the Centre's commitment to studying religion and media contributes to its larger mission of advancing social justice through decolonial and critical scholarship,one that recognises the power of discourse to both reproduce and resist inequality, and that insists on the transformative potential of research that engages public life and popular culture as a site of moral and intellectual struggle.

The Centre not only studies religion and media, but also uses media as a platform for public scholarship creating spaces where research on religion, gender, race, and justice can be made accessible, participatory, and transformative.Professor Sarojini Nadar, Director of the Tutu Centre and the Desmond Tutu SARChI Chair in Religion and Social Justice is a world renowned and leading scholar of religion and gender. She will reflect on her work as an African feminist scholar of religion, sharing how she has engaged media as both a tool and a technique of public scholarship for social justice. Nadar will discuss how feminist theological insights and public media engagement intersect to challenge patriarchal, colonial, and epistemic hierarchies, while advancing justice.

Finally, Senior Researcher Thandi Gamedze, whose work lies in the area of Religion, Education, and Epistemology, will discuss her innovative approach to public scholarship through creative and participatory methods. Drawing on both poetry and interactive game design, she explores how artistic and playful mediums can serve as tools for critical reflection, community engagement, and decolonial education. One of her key projects, Freedom Theologies: South Africa, is a game-activity that employs a bingo-adjacent methodology to facilitate engagement with accessibly curated yet often marginalised narratives of the South African Church's role in the anti-apartheid struggle. Through such imaginative pedagogical tools, Gamedze foregrounds how creative practice can become a form of public and critical pedagogy, inviting participants/students to engage deeply with questions of history, justice, and religion.

The panel will conclude with an interactive Q&A session, inviting participants to reflect on how religion and media in their many forms can serve as vital spaces for decolonial and justice-oriented scholarship, pedagogy, and practice.

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Digital Media's Power and Perils in Mobilizing Filipino Catholics for Socio-Political Involvement

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The media serves as a double-edged sword. While its pervasive and widespread reach offers significant benefits, it also presents notable risks to individuals, communities, and organizations like the Catholic Church. In recent years, the rise of various social media platforms and advancements in communication and digital technology have significantly awakened the consciousness of Catholics regarding their call to embrace authentic Christianity that aspires towards eternal life, all while remaining engaged and proactive in socio-political matters. This also exposes them to various initiatives and programs, enriching their understanding of how they can contribute to the Church's socio-political initiatives. However, the use of digital media without well-defined boundaries and specific guidelines can lead to increased polarization, both within the Catholic community and between Catholics and non-Catholics. Such polarization can foster echo chambers that promote narrow perspectives or distorted views of reality.

To maximize the benefits of digital media while mitigating its associated risks for the Catholic community, this paper will employ the see-judge-act framework to analyze the issue. It will begin by examining how the Catholic Church in the Philippines has effectively leveraged digital media and platforms to engage and mobilize its members. Subsequently, it will evaluate the advantages and opportunities presented by digital media as well as the challenges it poses to fostering greater social involvement among Filipino Catholics. Furthermore, the paper will analyze digital media—considering its opportunities and risks—through the lens of Church teachings. Finally, it will propose strategies to enhance the advantages of digital media while minimizing potential dangers.

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Holy Hacking: Soul Habits for AI Engagement

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This paper examines the dynamic intersection of spirituality, ethics, and artificial intelligence (AI), proposing a framework for mindful and ethically grounded engagement with emerging technologies. Under the concept of Holy Hacks, the presentation introduces the cultivation of "soul habits" as a set of spiritual practices that equip those engaged in ministry and pastoral care to navigate the digital age with discernment, intentionality, and depth. Rather than approaching AI as a purely technical or utilitarian tool, the framework emphasizes holistic integration, inviting users to reflect on how technology shapes attention, relationships, and vocational purpose.

Drawing on theological reflection and practical wisdom, Holy Hacks situates AI within broader conversations on human flourishing, ethical responsibility, and spiritual resilience. It further contributes to empirical scholarship by presenting findings from a recent study conducted with pastors across diverse contexts. It also examines pastors' levels of awareness, knowledge, and current use of AI in ministry settings, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of integrating digital tools into pastoral practice. Results reveal a spectrum of engagement, ranging from cautious experimentation to deeper concerns about dependency, surveillance, and ethical implications.

By combining theoretical insights with lived experience, this paper argues that cultivating soul habits such as attentiveness, critical reflection, communal discernment, and practices of rest can foster conscious engagement with AI that honors both technological innovation and spiritual integrity. Ultimately, Holy Hacks aims to equip religious leaders and communities with resources for navigating AI in ways that deepen, rather than diminish, their call to human and spiritual flourishing.

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Fratelli Tutti **and the Path to Fraternity in Digital Communication**

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In an increasingly digitized world, communication technologies have transformed how individuals relate, engage, and build communities. This paper explores the ethical and spiritual implications of digital communication through the lens of Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis' third encyclical on fraternity and social friendship. Drawing on Catholic social teaching and key Church documents (Inter Mirifica, Communio et Progressio, and Aetatis Novae), the study examines the Church's evolving response to media culture and its moral responsibilities. It analyzes the challenges digital platforms pose to human dignity, including the erosion of privacy, the rise of social media addiction, and the decline of authentic dialogue. At the same time, it highlights the potential of digital media to foster encounter, empathy, and solidarity when guided by values of truth, love, and respect. Employing theological reflection and academic research, the paper proposes a reimagined digital culture grounded in universal fraternity, personal encounter, and responsible engagement, one that aligns technological advancement with the common good. Ultimately, it offers a call to action: to cultivate a "culture of encounter" that restores

human connection in digital spaces and reflects the Gospel's vision of inclusive and compassionate community.

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From the Altar to the Screen: The Transformation of Religious Icons into Memes and Youth Engagement with Faith

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Icons have long served within the Church as sacred artistic representations of God, the Blessed Mother, and the heavenly hosts. Across both Western and Eastern traditions, they are not merely decorative but are revered as objects of veneration—honored and respected in ways that echo ancient practices. This tradition traces its roots to the reverence shown toward the Ark of the Covenant and the sacred imagery of Solomon's Temple in the Old Testament, and continues through the Apostolic Era (Narinskaya, 2012). Today, many of these same icons are finding new life in the unpredictable world of internet memes. This paper examines the transformation of religious icons into memes and what this reveals about contemporary youth attitudes toward faith. Importantly, it highlights how young people engage with religious imagery through memes in ways that feel relevant, meaningful, and accessible within a digital age (Campbell, 2017). Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916/1983) semiotic theory of the sign, which highlights the arbitrary yet meaningful relationship between the signifier (the form) and the signified (the concept), the study explores how memes reconfigure sacred symbols through digital means. This transformation also aligns with Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of remediation, which describes how new media reshape older communicative forms into culturally resonant content. From a psychological standpoint, memeification functions as a means for youth to negotiate meaning, emotion, and identity in their religious engagement. Theories on identity formation, humor, and cognitive consistency shed light on how these digital expressions influence the way young people relate to and redefine religious values. Specifically, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) explains how memes allow youth to express their religious identity within the age of social media, while Albert Bandura's concept of observational learning highlights how such behaviors are modeled and reinforced within peer groups. While religious memes often challenge sacred norms and create cognitive dissonance between reverence and humor, McGraw and Warren's (2010) Benign Violation Theory and Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory suggest that youth may

reinterpret both memes and their religious understanding in ways that make faith more relatable and personally meaningful.

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Virtual Catholic Parishes: A Feasible Reality?

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During the global lockdown caused by the pandemic, many parishes took advantage of social media platforms and technology to livestream Masses and other liturgical celebrations, hold catechism classes, and other spiritually formative activities. They also created venues for dialogue and discourse on Catholic faith and morality. Even as the world returned to normal, this practice in the Church continued.

The liturgy, faith, and moral and spiritual formation align with the teaching and sanctifying mission of the Church, which must be carried out under the direction of a particular pastor or parish priest and the overall guidance of the diocesan bishop, whose jurisdiction is primarily defined by territoriality or physical location. While the option to participate in Mass virtually and nurture one's faith through digital platforms can assist those unable to attend their local parish for liturgical celebrations and can significantly aid in the intellectual faith formation of believers, it lacks an essential component—the authentic sense of communion that can only be fully experienced through interaction with real people.

Through content analysis, the paper will investigate the impact of the use of digital and social media platforms on the participation of Catholics in their respective parishes. Next, the paper will examine the nature and essential elements of a parish and its pastoral functions through the lens of Vatican II's ecclesiology and the Code of Canon Law. Finally, it will evaluate the feasibility of establishing virtual Catholic parishes in light of theological and canonical theories and principles.

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Preaching with AI: A Practical Theological Experiment

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is now part of everyday life, and even the church is starting to see its impact. One new use of AI is in preaching, where tools like ChatGPT can help pastors prepare

sermons. While this technology brings convenience, it also raises questions about doctrine, pastoral care, and the spiritual life of the church. I noticed that no field-tested guide exists for how pastors can use AI responsibly in sermon preparation.

To explore this, I conducted a practical theological experiment with eleven pastors. Over four Sundays, each pastor preached sermons created with ChatGPT. I then gathered feedback from three groups: A total of 480 church congregation responses who gave blind feedback about clarity, relevance, and spiritual impact, ten ordained elders who evaluated 40 sermons on doctrine, Scripture, clarity, and pastoral tone, and the pastors themselves (who reflected on usability, spiritual connection, and future use).

The findings show that AI-assisted sermons can be clear, relevant, and spiritually meaningful, but they also have limits in doctrinal depth and biblical exegesis. Based on these results, this study develops a field-tested AI Prompt Guide to help pastors and lay leaders use ChatGPT in ways that strengthen clarity and accessibility while keeping faithfulness, pastoral care, and context at the center of preaching.

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East or West Home is the Best: AI and Asian Spirituality— A Critical Reflection

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This research critically examines the interaction between AI and Asian spirituality, assessing whether technological innovations align with or disrupt the core values embedded in traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism, and Confucianism. While AI offers promising possibilities, such as enhancing meditation practices, automating spiritual education, and facilitating ethical decision-making, it simultaneously raises concerns about diminishing human intuition, human empathy, emotional depth, and moral reflection. Asian spirituality emphasizes harmony between the mind, body, and universe—an essence that AI, despite its vast capabilities, struggles to replicate. This critical reflection explores the intersection of AI development and Asian spiritual traditions, interrogating whether the proverb "East or West, home is best" holds relevance in navigating the tensions and synergies between technology and spirituality. While AI's foundations are largely rooted in Western techno-scientific paradigms—emphasizing efficiency, progress, and material outcomes—Asian spiritual philosophies, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism and Hinduism, prioritize interconnectedness, mindfulness, and harmony with nature. This paper examines the foundations, learning models, key features and logical framework of Asian Spirituality and its relevance in the context of todays modern technological developments such as digitality and AI tools. Ultimately, this reflection argues that a balanced integration of AI and Asian spirituality requires humility, interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusion, communion and a rejection of techno-utopianism. By grounding AI development in Spiritual enlightenment, social engagement, and moral integrity; humanity might forge a path where technology serves not as a disruptor but as a bridge between East and West, tradition and modernity. The

challenge lies in ensuring that "home"—whether interpreted as cultural heritage or universal human dignity—remains at the heart of innovation and transformation; tradition and science; and doctrine and service.

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Engaging Religion in Digital Video Games

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The integration of digital media into religious propositions and materials presents various challenges. While it enables convenience and at times wider access to faith-based content, issues such as digital divide, technological literacy, and content authenticity arise. In addition, not all religious communities enjoy equal access to devices or reliable internet, thus delimiting availability. Concerns about maintaining doctrinal integrity in a rapidly changing digital landscape also raise complications in some instances. Additionally, over-reliance on digital materials ran the risk of diluting traditional faith practices and face confrontation from some adherents. Despite these difficulties, digital media offers opportunities for dynamic engagement and connection.

For a long time, in many religious communities like in the Philippines, religion and religious constructs are largely understood in traditional senses provided in catechetical manuals. For this reason, religion is preached in either print or oral media. But what if religious categories and concepts are communicated in virtual language? What correlates can be assigned to religious constructs in virtual digital imagination? The present study provides critical insights into the digital transposition of religious constructs as a way of introducing and communicating religious or catechetical constructs using a locally produced video-based digital game. The local digital video game will serve as a primary material of analysis to understand the dynamics behind the transposition. This study excludes an analysis of the effectiveness of the material in conveying catechetical message among its users. The discussion opens an encouraging valuation of the significance of the digital virtual world in the articulation of catechetical material in digital categories. Overall, this review offers a commentary into the possibilities of integrating digital media in religious instruction and pastoral formation.

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Decoding Digital Narratives: Performance Criticism as a Biblio-Hermeneutical Lens

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The paper explores Performance Criticism as an emerging hermeneutical tool within biblical studies, emphasizing its relevance in the context of digital storytelling. It highlights the ancient oral traditions that shaped biblical texts, arguing that the Bible evolved through storytelling, public readings, and performances. This study underscores the constitutive, epistemic, and critical dimensions of story performance. Through oral performances, biblical stories conveyed emotional depth and cultural resonance, engaging audiences with their communal and contextual relevance. The text delves into the interplay between performer and audience, illustrating how memory, emotion, and embodiment enhance storytelling. It argues that ancient scribes, far from being mere transcribers, were active participants in preserving and reshaping the stories for their communities. By engaging with the performative nature of biblical texts, Performance Criticism offers a dynamic interpretative framework that integrates historical, rhetorical, and social analyses. Furthermore, the paper advocates for re-appropriating biblical storytelling as a powerful communication paradigm in contemporary faith contexts. The rediscovery of memorization and internalization enriches the performance, fostering holistic engagement that connects mind, body, and spirit. By emphasizing storytelling's transformative potential, the study proposes it as a medium to renew biblical communication and influence cultural paradigms.

This hermeneutical approach bridges the gap between ancient oral traditions and modern interpretative needs, making biblical narratives more accessible, engaging, and relevant in today's digital and post-literate culture. Performance Criticism thus emerges as a vital tool for re-imagining biblical communication in ways that resonate across time and cultures.

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Spreading the Gospel in the Digital Age: Catholic Reflections on Social Media through Almusalita

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Social media has become a vital tool for evangelization, reflection, and faith-based engagement in the Catholic Church. This study explores how Almusalita, a digital apostolate founded by the late Fr. Luciano Felloni, utilizes platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to share the Gospel, inspire faith, and build community. With its creative blend of Filipino cultural identity and accessible digital catechesis, Almusalita has emerged as a model of digital apostleship. The research focuses on three areas: the effectiveness of Almusalita's content in fostering Catholic faith formation, the role of Catholic digital evangelists in shaping online engagement, and the impact of social media on community-building and interfaith dialogue. Originally designed as a mixed-methods study incorporating surveys, interviews, and content analysis, this paper presents findings primarily from a survey of Filipino Catholic audiences in the Diocese of Novaliches. Interviews with digital missionaries and content analysis are identified as directions for future research. Findings suggest that Almusalita provides spiritual

nourishment through daily reflections and online Masses, strengthens prayer routines, and fosters solidarity through online faith-sharing. Respondents emphasized the credibility and authenticity of Fr. Felloni, which increased their trust and engagement. However, challenges were also identified, including digital distraction, superficial engagement, misinformation, and the irreplaceable role of sacramental practice. Ultimately, this study highlights best practices in Catholic digital evangelization while affirming that social media is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to, embodied sacramental life. It demonstrates that faith can thrive online without losing its roots in Catholic tradition, provided digital ministry is grounded in authenticity, theological integrity, and pastoral presence.

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Digital Discipleship for Ecological Justice: Faith-Based Media, Theology, and Climate Advocacy in the Philippines

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This study explores how faith-based digital media in the Philippines functions as a catalyst for ecological consciousness and climate advocacy. Set against a backdrop of severe climate vulnerability and deep religiosity, the research examines how religious institutions, lay movements, youth networks, and interfaith coalitions utilize digital platforms, including Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok, to communicate environmental responsibility through theological and cultural lenses. Drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, Papal encyclicals (Laudato Si', Laudate Deum), and indigenous Filipino values (bayanihan, pakikipagkapwa), the research employs qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenology, to examine content from 2022–2024. The analysis identifies five dominant themes in faith-based ecological communication: creation stewardship, ecological conversion, justice and solidarity, prophetic witness, and communal participation. These themes are expressed through social media posts, liturgical innovations, youth activism, and interfaith campaigns. The study also engages with ethical concerns surrounding religious media, such as performative activism, algorithmic sensationalism, exclusion of grassroots voices, and commodification of sacred symbols, drawing from Filipino scholarship to critique digital theology practices. Recommendations include investing in theological integration, fostering inclusive collaboration with marginalized communities, implementing ethical media training, expanding interfaith networks, diversifying content formats, and establishing impact monitoring tools. Ultimately, the study asserts that digital discipleship is not merely doctrinal, it is a lived, prophetic response to ecological crisis. In reimagining spiritual vocation through digital storytelling, prayer, and civic engagement, Philippine faith communities offer a compelling model of climate-responsive theology.

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Digital Discipleship for Ecological Justice: Faith-Based Media, Theology, and Climate Advocacy in the Philippines

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This study explores how faith-based digital media in the Philippines functions as a catalyst for ecological consciousness and climate advocacy. Set against a backdrop of severe climate vulnerability and deep religiosity, the research examines how religious institutions, lay movements, youth networks, and interfaith coalitions utilize digital platforms, including Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok, to communicate environmental responsibility through theological and cultural lenses. Drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, Papal encyclicals (Laudato Si', Laudate Deum), and indigenous Filipino values (bayanihan, pakikipagkapwa), the research employs qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenology, to examine content from 2022–2024. The analysis identifies five dominant themes in faith-based ecological communication: creation stewardship, ecological conversion, justice and solidarity, prophetic witness, and communal participation. These themes are expressed through social media posts, liturgical innovations, youth activism, and interfaith campaigns. The study also engages with ethical concerns surrounding religious media, such as performative activism, algorithmic sensationalism, exclusion of grassroots voices, and commodification of sacred symbols, drawing from Filipino scholarship to critique digital theology practices. Recommendations include investing in theological integration, fostering inclusive collaboration with marginalized communities, implementing ethical media training, expanding interfaith networks, diversifying content formats, and establishing impact monitoring tools. Ultimately, the study asserts that digital discipleship is not merely doctrinal, it is a lived, prophetic response to ecological crisis. In reimagining spiritual vocation through digital storytelling, prayer, and civic engagement, Philippine faith communities offer a compelling model of climate-responsive theology.

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The Role of Digital Media and Challenges to Buddhist Peace Education in Conflict Affected Myanmar: A Case Study of a Buddhist University in Mandalay

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Abstract

Myanmar has been experiencing a civil war for several decades, creating an urgent need for peace education. Religious groups have initiated peace education programs for the wider community. However, such initiatives face several challenges. Despite their significance, studies on peace education in Myanmar have been rare and even non-existent concerning religious peace education particularly during the on-going conflict situation at the moment. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by focusing on peace education initiatives at a Buddhist university in Mandalay through a qualitative case study. With three objectives: (1) to identify the challenges facing peace education during conflict, (2) to analyze the role of digital media—including the internet, mobile phones, and social media in facilitating peace education, and (3) to explore Buddhist perspectives on the use of digital media by monks in light of the Vinaya discipline, data were collected during the two academic years 2023 and 2024 through questionnaires, interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork. Findings reveal that peace education is undermined by multiple factors. Conflict-related disruptions, like power shortages, internet instability, disruptions in teaching and learning, insecurity and travel restriction , weaken the educational environment. Religion-based limitations, including a Buddhist-centric curriculum, gender discrimination, and less participation in interfaith dialogue, can constrain the scope of peace studies, justice and inclusivity. In addition, insufficient investment in human resources hinders institutional growth. Nevertheless, digital media has become a significant facilitator of teaching, learning, research, and communication. Despite challenges of limited infrastructure, poor connectivity, and low digital literacy, most monks reported extensive use of mobile phones for education, Dhamma propagation, and communication. While many view such use as a positive change, focusing more on its benefits than its drawbacks, concerns remain regarding distraction, misuse, and reputational risks. This study contributes to the limited scholarship on peace education in Myanmar by demonstrating how conflict conditions, Buddhist institutional structures, and digital technologies intersect to shape religious-based peace education.

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Evolving Digital Evangelism: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Catholic Online Preaching in the Philippines

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In the Philippines, digital evangelism has developed into a dynamic form of religious mobilization, shaped by priests, religious organizations, and community-based media ministries. Guided by Craig's Socio-Cultural Tradition of Communication and employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA),

this study examines how three Catholic digital platforms—Fr. Fiel Pareja's may kasAMA ka! podcasts/vlogs, the Society of St. Paul's PadsCast, and the parish-based Sabins Studio livestreams—construct religious narratives and mobilize faith communities. Data were drawn from selected episodes, homilies, and livestreams, coded across textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions.

Findings show that Fr. Pareja's discourse emphasizes personalized storytelling, emotional resonance, and para-social intimacy, positioning the priest as an "influencer" who appeals to youth and digital natives. PadsCast, by contrast, reflects the institutional voice of the Pauline media apostolate, deploying catechetical clarity, doctrinal authority, and structured branding to reinforce the Church's teaching role in the digital age. Sabins Studio, rooted in parish and community contexts, projects liturgical solemnity and cultural identity while extending participation to diaspora Filipinos; it also integrates crisis response and prophetic commentary in selected homilies (e.g., Bishop Soc Villegas).

Across platforms, the shift from hierarchical preaching to dialogic, mediated, and participatory religious discourse is evident. Digital evangelization emerges not only as an extension of liturgy and catechesis but also as a reconfiguration of Catholic identity, moral authority, and community obligations in the online sphere. By combining the socio-cultural lens of communication with CDA, the study underscores how Filipino Catholic online preaching simultaneously sustains tradition and adapts to contemporary digital culture.

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Digital Ethnography and the Public Visibility of Rice-Merit Networks in Karen Catholic Communities, Northern Thailand

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This qualitative study assesses how digital media practices of Rice-Merit Networks (RMN) in Karen Catholic communities in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, shape public visibility and communal participation, and examines the core religio-cultural elements of the RMNs. To promote mutual aid, sharing, and solidarity grounded in cultural and religious values, the RMNs were formally formed in March 2002 across 383 villages in the northern Thai provinces of Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Chiang Rai, and Lamphun, which now extend to more than 700. The study employed a digital ethnographic approach supported by semi-structured interviews with parish priests of Betharram Karen parishes, organic intellectuals (OIs), and Karen academicians. With explicit opt-in consent, excerpts from parish/diocesan Facebook pages, YouTube channels, websites of Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC), the Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities (RTRC) Chiang Mai, and parishes and opt-in RMN LINE groups of the RMN coordinators were analyzed as data sources. Research identified four core elements that emerged: ecological safeguarding, sufficiency economy, theology of rice, and Karen holistic worldview. Media analysis showed that rice-merit ceremonies, along with media accounting, contributed to a broader digital-religion dynamic in which local religio-cultural practices are reconfigured through ethnic co-existence; images and narrative circulation shaped and strengthened communal belonging; and OIs' digital practices enhanced public visibility and participation. In 2025, the network documented 67,404 kg of rice, ฿1,086,530 in donations, and 4,807 participants across four zones. In the Betharram subset (69 villages; 2,219 families), Maepon

and Huaytong comprise 59.5% of households, concentrating events and 'media accounting' that amplify welfare visibility. The study also identified practical challenges pointing to future research, including community food security and welfare, climate change and natural disasters, and youth participation.

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Ideological Texture and the Politics of Biblical Interpretation: (Con)texturing Ideologies of Modesty, Authority, and Childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:8–15

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This paper engages 1 Timothy 2:8–15 through the lens of ideological and feminist criticism, examining both the text's ancient ideological texture and its contemporary reception. Building on previous socio-rhetorical work on Pauline texts, I analyze how Paul and conservative Christian blogger Lori Alexander who promotes a literalist, hierarchical reading of biblical gender roles on her platform 'The Transformed Wife' each establish authority within their believing communities. Alexander's interpretation exemplifies the broader backlash against liberation hermeneutics, particularly in the Trump-era political climate, where Black, feminist, and queer readings of Scripture face heightened resistance. By interrogating three key ideological concerns: modesty, authority, and childbearing, I demonstrate how male headship and female subordination are not merely accepted but actively reinforced both in the United States and in South Africa. I conclude by proposing con(text)uring as a methodological approach that critically examines ideological texture within both text and context, offering a productive way to engage with the enduring and often harmful influence of biblical interpretations on gender.

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Re-Reading Luke 10:25-37 in the Digital Age: Postcolonial Exegesis and Filipino Perspectives on Cyber-Neighborliness

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This study offers a re-reading of Luke 10:25-37 in the context of the digital age, with a particular focus on the question posed by the lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" The parable of the Good Samaritan, as narrated by Jesus, serves as a foundational response to this question, which is examined through the lens of contemporary cyber-contexts. The study employs a method of post-colonial Biblical

exegesis to analyze the power dynamics and historical contexts that have shaped interpretations of the parable, while also integrating a cultural analysis that draws on Filipino concepts of kapwa (shared identity) and pakikipagkapwa (engagement with others). These cultural ideas provide a distinct perspective on the notion of neighborliness, emphasizing relational solidarity and community-building beyond geographic and social boundaries. Through a literary analysis of Luke 10:25-37, the study explores how the concept of neighbor has evolved within various social, political, and religious contexts. Attention is given to how these evolving interpretations regulate the conduct of different groups, particularly in digital spaces. The study concludes by re-articulating the idea of "neighbor" and "neighborhood" in the age of cyberspace, suggesting that digital platforms, as spaces of social interaction, advocacy, and compassion, offer new opportunities for global neighborliness. This re-reading calls for a critical engagement with the cyber-highway as a modern-day platform for cultivating solidarity and ethical action, grounded in both theological reflection and cultural practice.

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As You Seek, So You Are Served: Bhagavad Gita 4.11 and the Logic of Algorithmic Reciprocity

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This paper draws a conceptual parallel between the theology of reciprocal divinity articulated in Bhagavad Gita 4.11 — "Ye yathā mām̐ prapadyante tām̐stathaiva bhajāmyaham" ("As people surrender unto Me, so do I reciprocate") — and the logic of algorithmic personalization in social media environments. In this well-known verse, Krishna describes a dynamic and responsive divine relationship, in which the form of the deity adjusts to the mode of the devotee's engagement — whether as child, lover, friend, or teacher (Patton 2005).

While exploring this theological model, I became interested in the way algorithmic systems — particularly those employed by content recommendation engines on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok — reflect a structurally similar form of personalized responsiveness. Algorithms "reciprocate" user behavior by curating digital experiences tailored to past engagement, often reinforcing belief systems and identity expressions through feedback loops. This has striking implications for how religious content is encountered, affirmed, and embodied in online spaces.

Rather than treating this resemblance as merely metaphorical, the paper situates both traditions — scriptural and digital — within a broader epistemological framework of responsive systems, drawing on scholarship in digital religion (Campbell 2020), Hindu theology (Patton 2005), and media studies (Gillespie 2014; Noble 2018). Through close readings of both textual sources and case studies of devotional behavior in algorithmically shaped spaces, the paper explores how sacred reciprocity is being recontextualized — or perhaps re-enacted — through technological mediation.

This investigation aims to contribute to interdisciplinary conversations around belief, identity, and the performative power of platforms in shaping contemporary religious life.

Streaming the Sacred: Entanglements of Religion, Public Pedagogy and Epistemic Freedom

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In 2024, the Thai crime drama series The Believers, appeared on Netflix worldwide. A dramatised work of fiction it tells the compelling story of three friends with a huge collective debt who develop a successful scheme for stealing money from Buddhist temples. The Believers is a well-crafted entertainment production that offers a surprising, intimate and extended portrait of Buddhism in Thailand. Streaming television has opened novel frontiers for global media circulations and exchanges. Far more diverse viewing options are circulated through these platforms and play a powerful role in contesting the cultural hegemony of the Global North, especially the United States of America. This paper conceptualises The Believers as an example of public pedagogy and illustrates how it performs the dual function of entertainment and education, through the conventions of its genre and its depictions and representation of Thai culture and Buddhism. Located at the intersections of decolonial theories of religion and media studies and reflecting from the South African context, where Buddhism is a micro-minority religious tradition, with limited public visibility and awareness, this paper explores how streaming media content disrupts the geopolitics of knowledge production and consumption, encourages religious diversity, engenders religious pluralism and advances epistemic freedom.

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Mediatization of a New Imperial Spirituality in Contemporary India

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This article outlines the following aspects with serious consideration: mediatization and empire-building; mediatization and a new emperor; ethical implications of mediatization in India; and concluding remarks. Through this initiative, the nexus among the government, religion, and media is brought to the foreground, as there are initiatives of a new imperial and majoritarian spirituality. While the Constitution of India provides responsible freedom to the press, the media in the country aligns itself with the government as a supportive force and disseminates the authoritarian agenda. The media in the country collaborate with the government and facilitate a new spirituality that emerges around Narendra Modi. While there is an unethical proliferation of media in the country, at the risk of the rights and privileges of subaltern communities, a new emperor and a new empire are introduced to the people.

Religion Devoid of the Spiritual -- Challenges for "Internet 4 Trust" -- Critiquing Hindutva's Politicization of Hinduism and the Challenges for a Digital India

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My paper critically interrogates the present Government's instrumentalization of Hinduism as a political ideology while stripping it of its spiritual essence, with a focal lens on the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya as emblematic case study. The discourse evolves through historical, rhetorical, sociological, and philosophical analyses, culminating in reflections on public perceptions and the temple's sacral erosion as of October 15, 2025. It also looks at the challenges for UNESCO's Internet for Trust (I4T) Initiative within the framework of Digital Governance in a polarized context.

At its core, Hindutva—articulated by V.D. Savarkar (1923) and institutionalized via the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—reconfigures Hinduism's pluralistic ethos (rooted in Upanishadic dharma, ahimsa, and advaita) into an ethno-nationalist framework excluding minorities like Muslims. Policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and anti-conversion laws exemplify this fusion, fostering "electoral autocracy" that erodes constitutional secularism.

The Ram Mandir emerges as Hindutva's apotheosis and Achilles' heel. Its January 22, 2024, consecration—performed by Modi as quasi-priestly avatar—symbolized reclaimed heritage from the 1992 Babri demolition, galvanizing electoral mobilization since the 1980s Rath Yatra. Yet, the 2024 Lok Sabha defeat in Faizabad (Ayodhya's constituency), untangles a paradox: grievance fulfilment exposed governance voids. This signals Hindutva's plateau: perpetual viraha (longing) sustains it, but delivery demands equity, echoing Gandhi's Hind Swaraj on nationalism's spiritual betrayal.

Public views of the Mandir, per 2025 data, reflect this ambivalence: 22 crore visitors affirm devotional triumph—Surya Tilak rituals evoking "mesmerizing" catharsis, boosting UP's economy (77% urban approval)—yet critiques abound among locals (50-60% footfall dips, vendor inequities) and sceptics (73% decry vote-bank ploy). X sentiments hail it as "civilizational win" for pride, but lament "cringe" aesthetics and politicization diluting sanctity.

Looking at this with Gen Z lenses, it would be interesting to see how this has challenged Digital Governance and what could the barriers be as a result of the erosion of the spiritual. The paper will also take a cursory look at how digital governance in India has been compromised due to the particular way in which the Indian government has chosen to define Nation, Nationhood and Nationalism. These challenges, while universal, intensify in ideologically charged arenas like India's, where I4T's trust-building ethos confronts spirituality's online desecration. Progress hinges on adaptive, inclusive evolution to mitigate harms without eroding pluralism.

Finally, the paper argues affirmatively that Ram faith's spirituality has been expatriated, leaving a monumental husk. Politicization (Modi's avatarism, RSS's Ram Rajya nationalism) and commercialization commodify Ram as a revenge icon, inverting maryada purushottama's ethics. Delays to September 2025 underscore unfinished sacrality, with subaltern fatigue (Dalit alienation) and discursive shifts ("Jai Shri Ram" as assault mantra) evidencing hollowing. In sum, this paper illuminates Hindutva's pyrrhic ascent—triumphing symbolically, faltering materially—risking a "ruined" faith amid inequality and looks at what the challenges are today as a result of this.

Sanctifying Settler Colonialism: An Intersectional Discursive Analysis of Christian Zionist Media Statements

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This paper presents an intersectional discursive analysis of a web statement issued on 10 January 2024 by a group of self-identified South African Christian leaders opposing the South African government's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice. Using a critical discourse analytic framework informed by Michel Foucault's theorisation of discourse and power, the paper examines how the statement's pragmatic, ethical, and theological dimensions work together to translate Zionist political interests into the language of moral and spiritual authority.

Read alongside the Kairos Document of 1985, the analysis situates the 2024 statement within a changing media ecology that transforms how religious authority is produced and circulated. Whereas Kairos theology emerged from a slow, consultative print culture rooted in collective discernment and liberation theology, the 2024 statement belongs to the fast, affect-driven environment of digital media. Its authority derives not from theological rigour but from rhetorical immediacy and emotional resonance.

Across its three fronts, the statement deploys distinctive rhetorical strategies. On the pragmatic front, it invokes national interest and religious freedom to construct a regime of moral reasonableness. On the ethical front, it appropriates feminist and liberationist vocabularies such as "victim blaming" to reframe Israel as the victim and Palestine as the aggressor. On the theological front, it redeploys the language of peace characteristic of apartheid-era church theology, sanctifying inaction under the guise of neutrality.

Drawing on Mitri Raheb's notion of empire's theological "software," the paper argues that the statement exemplifies how digital media now function as moral infrastructure, transforming emancipatory theologies into instruments of ideological power. In doing so, it advances scholarship on religion and media by tracing the shift from the deliberative textuality of Kairos to the affective immediacy of digital circulation, revealing how Christian Zionist discourse in South Africa performs a distinct kind of theological labour that both mediates and moralises empire in the twenty-first century.

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Boundary Markers in Acts 8:26-40: On Decolonising "Othered" Bodies

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Cartography – the scientific name for 'mapping' – sets boundaries to separate places and people. It is, "another name for stories told by winners". Thus, for the marginalized "othered" there is no cartography to relate to because the story it tells, ignores the legitimate presence of their bodies and being. Historically, research and reception history – and by implication sermons – based on Acts 8:26-40 present the racially and sexually 'marked' body of the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch as a literary prop to advance the story of the dominant culture, namely, the missionary task in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The co-option of biblical interpretation that support colonial endeavours continues to reinforce stereo-typical views of "othered" bodies. Many feminist and womanist theologians, particularly the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, have already established a link between patriarchy and the violation of bodies and being of those "othered" in cultures of patriarchy and kyriarchy. In general, the work of some feminist biblical scholars expose how biblical texts are used in contemporary contexts to justify injustices inherent in racism, sexism, classism and genderism. Framed within a decolonial feminist epistemology, this chapter explores how, when Acts 8:26-40 is read from the "othered" side, through theo-ethical feminist lenses, a different picture of the Ethiopian eunuch emerges. This picture creates spaces for 'othered' bodies to (re)claim their legitimate presence in dominant heteronormative patriarchal cultures that dismiss their 'being' as irrelevant and of no consequence.

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When Memes Communicate a Mediatized Lived Buddhism: Negotiating the Performance of Religious Heterodoxy and Remixed Bias Religion Online in Popular Internet Memes

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This paper/presentation will explore how internet memes and memetic culture can be seen as a site of production for religious bias and heterodoxy that challenges traditional religious beliefs and identity narratives. This work draws on visual and textual analysis methods to study over 800 internet memes depicting the beliefs and practices of the five major world religions. The study aimed to identify the prominent meme characters and macros used to communicate religious stereotypes. This presentation will present findings on the stereotypes depicted in English and Chinese memes about Buddhism. In both cases, the study found that meme image templates heavily rely both on explicit historical stereotypes and flawed, remixed popular media representation, which informed how Buddhist clergy and believers were depicted through internet memes. These memes often relied on techniques of "othering" to visualize over-generalized and inauthentic depictions of Asian Buddhists The presentation argues that because memes use distinct forms of humor to communicate, this style can obscure the subversive nature of the religious narratives they represent (Campbell, Tsuria & Xid 2025). Drawing on Nathan Crick's theory of propaganda (2022), which argues that communication media are increasingly used to produce and spread a digital rhetoric of persuasive power that consciously and unconsciously seeks to manipulate public opinion on contested issues, this presentation applies this argument to examine how the language of memes can be manipulated to propagate falsehoods that diminish religious groups. This paper also

consider the local and global implications of circulating memes that promoting religious bias and othering especially as they relate to issues of religious tolerance in an increasingly polarized global society.

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Rethinking the Influence of Digital Media in the Practice of *Panaad sa* Camiguin

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Panaad (promise) is a unique popular devotion held annually in Camiguin, northern part of Mindanao, Philippines. As practiced in Camiguin, Panaad is a religious promise expressed by trekking around the sixty-four (64) kilometer circumferential road of the island, culminating in walking uphill to Mt. Vulcan in Bonbon, Catarman, Camiguin, for the Stations of the Cross during Holy Week. For more than five (5) decades, Panaad sa Camiguin has been practiced both by the Camiguinon and non-Camiguinon pilgrims. This paper looks into the convergence of popular devotion and digital media in the popular devotion Panaad sa Camiguin. Through the see-discern-act methodology, this study examines the pivotal role of digital media platforms in shaping the experiences and perceptions of the pilgrims. The SEE part investigates the experiences of the Tigsaad (the one giving the promise) and the risk of falling into Paniid (just looking around). The DISCERN part consults Catholic Church documents such as the Congregation for the Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments' Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy (DPPL), Pope Francis' Evangelii Gaudium (EG) and the Dicastery for Communication's Towards Full Presence, A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media. The ACT part forwards pastoral imperatives addressing the tendency of the commodification of Panaad, which will eventually fall into Paniid, the homogenization of the religious tradition, and the danger of eroding embodied experiences. The conclusion of the paper amplifies the critical influence of digital media on how devotees engage with popular devotion, facilitating increased accessibility, connectivity, and community-building, but at the same time pointing out the challenges of digital engagement.

Reconciling Faith and the Rise of New Media: Kierkegaard's Two Ages vis-à-vis the Filipino Popular Piety of Traslación

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The unprecedented global pandemic five years ago has heavily impacted the usual practices we have conformed to, forcing us to adapt to new methods in moving on with life. The Catholic Church is one of the institutions shaken by this dilemma, from a house of God filled with the faithful whispering prayers to a building filled with empty pews, combined with nothing but utter silence. Consequently, the rise of technology and media provided a solution to the ongoing problem. Online masses were utilized so that even in the spaces of the faithful's home, they could participate and be in the presence of God in the Eucharist. In 2022, when the situation had eased, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) urged the faithful to return to attending liturgical celebrations physically to encounter and receive the Lord. A solution has perhaps turned into conformity. While it remains true that the world has to adapt to a "new normal" after the inflictions brought by the pandemic, the question is now raised: How do we reconcile the technological wave of media and the necessity of faith that requires presence? In a seemingly prophetic work, the Danish philosopher and Theologian Søren Kierkegaard differentiates the revolutionary and present ages. Kierkegaard's Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age A Literary Review (1846) argues that in the present age, an individual can lose himself in the opinion of the public, which dictates. This paper attempts to appropriate this critique of Kierkegaard vis-à-vis the Filipino popular piety of the traslación, where the image of Christ, known as the Black Nazarene, is followed by a million devotees in a religious procession every 9th of January in Manila. I argue in this paper that faith necessitates a physical sphere to flourish and that new media can offer not just alternatives for the public but also play a key role in the individual's faith.

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Vatican Miracle Examiner as Philosophy of Religion: The Intersections of Faith, Science, and Philosophy in an Anime Adaptation

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Ideas concerning religion are often communicated through popular media, such as anime. One of the anime adaptations that explicitly engages the intersections of religion, science, and philosophy is Vatican Kiseki Chosakan (2017) or Vatican Miracle Examiner. This anime adaptation centers on a special unit from the Vatican that verifies miraculous phenomena worldwide. In this study, I reflect on how the anime representation communicates religious ideas about miracles, prophecies, and

other spiritual matters to its viewers. This critical reflection reveals how anime promotes a philosophical view centered on the complementary relationship between religion and science. With these in mind, this study proceeds as follows. The first part summarizes and contextualizes the Vatican Miracle Examiner. The second part elaborates on the discernment of miracles through the lens of philosophy, science, and religion. Then, the third part showcases how Vatican Miracle Examiner serves as an allegorical communication of a unique philosophy of religion. Focusing on the mysterious events that transpired and were eventually investigated, the interpretation of their symbolism demonstrates the relevance of the conveyed religious ideas to contemporary times. Lastly, the utilization of artistic communication for religious ideas is considered. This study claims that anime, among other artistic creations, can evoke transformative religious experiences.

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Media as Mourner: The Death of Pope Francis and the Digital Ritualization of Grief

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On April 21, 2025, news broke out about the death of Pope Francis at the Domus Santa Marta in the Vatican at the age of 88. He died because of a stroke, followed by a coma and irreversible cardiocirculatory collapse. As the first Latin American Supreme Pontiff, his papacy was popular and remarkable, characterized by humility, simplicity, love of nature, and commitment to people with low incomes, as exemplified by St. Francis of Assisi. Following his passing, news outlets focused on the Catholic rites of the death of a pope, which involved the certification of death and public display of his body for the faithful to pay their respects, followed by the funeral and burial. In an age dominated by digital technologies, these have gone beyond the Vatican, and the media provided real-time updates and created spaces for people to witness this together. This led to the idea of "media as mourners" by leading the people to participate in the religious mourning. This paper explores the intersection of religion, media, and ritual through the lens of Pope Francis's death. It explores the question: How does the media act as mourner in the death of Pope Francis, and in what ways does this digital ritualization reflect a convergence of Catholic and Asian religious mourning practices? The following themes are discussed in presenting the said theme: Mourning in the Catholic Tradition, Mediatization and Digital Religion as New Spaces of Religious Expression, and Asian Spirituality and Digital Mourning. These perspectives reveal media as co-creators of sacred meaning in contemporary Catholic practice and a broader global spiritual context.

From Living in the Shadows to Facebook Livestreams: The Impact of Social Media on Current Mediumship Practice of Mother Goddesses Worship (*Đạo Mẫu*) in Vietnam

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This paper explores the transformative impact of social media on mediumship practice within the context of Mother Goddesses worship (Đạo Mẫu) in contemporary Vietnam. By examining the ways in which spirit mediums and practitioners utilise social media platforms, the study reveals that these digital spaces facilitate the open expression of belief, foster connections among practitioners, and enable the sharing and promotion of spiritual services as well as the online trade in ritual costumes and objects. Furthermore, social media has become a catalyst for emerging trends directly influencing the ritual practices and increasing the visibility of spirit mediums in today's society, creating generational shifts between younger spirit mediums and their predecessors, who practiced their belief in pre-renovation Vietnam under precarious circumstances. As rituals become more visible and accessible through social media, the interplay between digital and spiritual realms becomes increasingly significant. The findings suggest that social media not only enhances a sense of community among practitioners that transcends geographical boundaries, but also shapes the continuing developments of this traditional practices, contributing to a dynamic landscape of Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam today. This research underscores the agency and significance of digital platforms, in particular social media, in transforming spiritual expressions and adapting cultural traditions in the modern era.

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Lights, Karma, Action: Altering Life Trajectories Across Chronologies in Contemporary Thai Film

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This paper analyzes how Buddhist ethics, specifically the concept of karma, is evident in the storytelling and themes of four contemporary Thai drama films, selected from the submissions of Thailand to the Academy Awards Best International Feature Film category from 2020-2024.

From a narrative structure lens, flashback is a frequently-used device in these films used to connect past actions with consequences happening much later in the story, with either good or bad outcomes. Using reflexive thematic analysis yield findings which indicate that beyond just exploring karma as a core concept in Thai Buddhist films, the selected films can also be thematized with reference to the Four Noble Truths, the fourth of the Five Precepts, and the life of the historical Buddha. Taking a larger view, these themes taken together represent an "ethical journey" which characters undertake in their struggles overcoming greed and cultivating truthfulness.

This work should be regarded as highly exploratory, not only in area of study but also in methods, theoretical, and analytical framework. Further work can be done to apply this method of analysis across a wider selection of films from different societies as a means of understanding prevailing ethical dilemmas.

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Faith, Frames, and Feeds: A Media-Theological Look at the Passing of Pope Francis

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On the morning of April 21, 2025, Easter Monday, the Vatican's Camerlengo announced the death of the Holy Father Francis. As the world's 1.4 billion Catholics mourned the passing of the first Latin American pontiff, mass media – television, newspapers, social media, online news websites – across different contexts presented and framed the story in distinct and various angles. Not only did it take over the headlines, but also very personal posts – ranging from memorable quotes and words of gratitude to online vigils and eulogies – remembering lived experiences of and with Pope Francis. In light of these competing interpretations and ideological appropriations, this paper analyzes the media portrayal of the death of Pope Francis and its surrounding events through the intersecting lenses of framing theory, mediatization of religion, and public theology. This study investigates how mainstream news outlets, official Vatican reports, Catholic media, and digital platforms constructed meaning around Francis' legacy, the sede vacante, and almost immediate conversations on the "papabiles" as the world anticipates the conclave. This incorporates reports and presentations by the different Philippine media outlets, a local application stemming from the authors' immediate context. Utilizing the framing theory developed by Robert Entman, the first part focuses on how the media depicted Francis' papacy through different narratives – emphasizing themes on Church decentralization, reform, pastoral appropriation of doctrines, synodality, and timeless virtues of mercy and compassion. Furthermore, this explores the media's crucial role in sparking conversations regarding the sede vacante and conclave period. While the election for the next pope is a process of prayerful discernment by the cardinals and not influenced by public opinion, the constant posting of the "papabiles" framed the conclave as a suspenseful political drama rather than a Spirit-led and communion-centered ecclesial discernment. Such an initial presentation is then complemented by Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization of

religion. The second part discusses how media – in all its forms and institutions – increasingly influence religious communication and capture global and local attention. The paper argues that the digital feeds through which people now experience papal election and transition – replete with hashtags, instant commentaries, ideological filters, and AI-generated graphics and videos – constitute a new public square where religious and secular (even personal) sentiments meet. Finally, the paper adopts the framework of public theology to critically reflect on the Church's presence in the public sphere. It considers whether the global attention given to papal transitions serves as a moment of kairós – an opportunity to bear witness to ecclesial continuity and Catholic moral vision – or whether it risks reducing the Church's witness to a series of symbolic gestures consumed in a post-truth media environment. This part especially highlights how public theology is shown at the varying societal levels in the Philippines, enriching the communal experience of the events surrounding Francis' death. Through qualitative media content analysis and theological interpretation, this article offers an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of faith, media, and culture. It argues that a sound and appropriated theology – something that Francis himself embraced – is urgently needed to navigate the increasingly mediatized experience of ecclesial life, particularly in moments of papal transition that are both deeply human and spiritual.

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In Service of the Media: Kerygma & Kenosis

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This paper discusses two distinct periods during which, as a scholar, I was required to engage intensively with the media. Drawing on these two examples, I analyse what this type of media engagement reveals about the relationship between media and religion, particularly through the lens of knowledge economies.

During Pope Francis's visit to Southeast Asia in September 2024, and again following his death in April 2025, numerous media outlets approached me to provide analysis on Catholicism in Asia. As an anthropologist of Christianity in China and a researcher at a leading university in Asia, I am frequently called upon to offer academic expertise on topics such as Catholicism in Asia, Sino-Vatican relations, and the role of Asian cardinals.

At the same time, I also serve as an instituted minister in the Catholic Church, which positions me not only as an observer but also as an actor of Catholicism. By distinguishing between "expert" and "professional"—two forms of authority recognized differently by religious and media institutions—this paper argues that scholars engaging with the media on religious topics must learn to navigate between multiple knowledge economies, which are sometimes complementary but often in competition.

When a scholar finds themselves at the intersection of media and religion, their engagement sheds light on how both religious and media systems attempt to distinguish between academic expertise and professional authority, while simultaneously advancing divergent models of knowledge production and validation.

God, Government, and the Spotlight: Trust, Tensions, and Perceptions in Indonesia's Religious Landscape

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This study explores the interplay between religion, governance, and digital media, examining public trust in state institutions within a pluralistic religious landscape in Indonesia. Using Public Trust Theory as its primary framework, this study explores how perceptions of government fairness, transparency, and representation influence the public's collective trust in government policies related to religion. The study employs a mixed-methods quantitative and qualitative approach, collecting data through a structured survey that examines Indonesian citizens' evaluations of religious inclusivity in governance and the role of social media in shaping public trust perceptions. The findings of this study are expected to highlight key factors that drive or enhance trust in the religious sphere, particularly in the context of contested narratives and current digital amplification. Academically, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse on public trust, religious pluralism, and political communication. Practically, this study offers actionable insights for policymakers, communication strategists, and religious leaders in promoting inclusive governance and reducing tensions within diversity. This research aims to support a more responsive and trust-based approach to religious policymaking in Indonesia's evolving socio-political landscape.

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Making Patriarchy Palatable: A Feminist Critique of Masculine Religious Authority on Social Media

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This paper builds on Sarojini Nadar's concept of palatable patriarchy, first developed in her analysis of Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Movement in South Africa. We now extend this concept to the digital sphere to explore how masculine religious authority is both legitimised and contested online, in a chosen case study of a 2020 Facebook video by Cape Town imam Dawood Sampson, who announced his intention to take a second wife during South Africa's National Women's Month.

Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and the proposed framework of platformed piety, the paper examines how Sampson's performance combines devotional language that frames his authority as sacred, humour that softens misogyny through laughter, and linguistic intimacy, expressed through the language of Kaaps, that fosters identification and trust. Together, these elements make male control appear natural and morally justified.

While Buchan's revivalist masculinity operated through large-scale evangelical spectacle, Sampson's digital sermon achieves similar effects through affective intimacy and everyday speech. Both cases reveal how religious masculinities across traditions make patriarchy acceptable through humour and holiness.

By tracing these dynamics, the paper contributes to feminist debates on religion, media, and masculinity, showing that patriarchy endures not only through doctrine but through the pleasures that make it "feel right."

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