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SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EFFECTIVE PASTORAL TOOL

Abstract: An omnipresent civilization progress causes religion and moral values to become less and less important aspects of life for young people. A significant drop is noticed in the number of people attending Sunday Mass and praying regularly. At the same time, the number of non-believers is rising. Also, among young people labelling themselves as believing and practicing, a change in how they experience their faith can be observed. Those people search very often for evidence of personal faith testimony and sincere communication. Young people also desire to actively participate in the believers' community which is witnessed, for example, by being a member of different groups present in social media. Therefore, in this article, the author attempts to answer the question as to whether religious activity aimed at young people via social media is indeed effective. To answer that question, the author decided to put a couple of chosen forms of social media under analysis.

Keywords: religion, young people, Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, Twitter.

Introduction

With the progress of civilization and the development of new technologies, many changes are taking place on different levels of life. The social, moral and religious life of mankind is often transformed. The values conveyed by family, culture and the Church are being abandoned. Man starts to set norms and criteria of conduct for himself and religion and moral principles cease to be an important aspect of it in everyday life. Instead, man succumbs to the temptations of the modern world, which results in the disappearance of autotelic values that are replaced by hedonistic and self-realization values.

The media are also undergoing a process of transformation. Thanks to new communication possibilities, there is a chance to reach not only faithful practitioners, but also those affected by the crisis of faith, or indeed, atheists. Digital media, and especially social media, which are mostly used by young

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people, whose crisis of faith and religious practices are being noticed, create „new spaces in which religious needs can be met and have become an important, if not fundamental, source of religious information”. (Smołucha, 2018, p. 13)

As a result, the way of experiencing and communicating the faith has changed, especially among young believers. They are called ‘digital natives’, logged on almost 24 hours a day on social media, where they are often looking for new, attractive forms of communication about faith. Therefore, the subject of my interest in this article is generation Y and Z. The aim is to present an analysis of selected social media and pastoral activities undertaken in them as an effective tool in pastoral work.

Religiousness of Poles

The report of the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics on the religiousness of Poles published in January 2020 shows that the religious practices of Catholics living in Poland remain stable. As in previous years, 38.2% took part in Sunday Mass, and 17.3% of the faithful took part in Holy Communion in 2019. The most active Sunday Mass-goers are Catholics living in the Tarnów diocese – 71.1% and 64.3% of the Rzeszów diocese. The lowest percentage of participation in the Sunday Mass was recorded in the dioceses of Szczecin-Kamienna – 24.1% and in Łódź – 24.5%. (Sadłoń, Organek, 2020, p. 4) In contrast, the extensive study „Youth 2018” conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research shows that religiousness among Polish youth has diminished. Only 7% of young people participate in religious practices several times a week, 28% once a week, 11% 1–2 times a month, 18% several times a year. 35% of teenagers do not participate in religious practices. Over the course of 10 years, the declaration of faith of deep-seated and believing youth has dropped by 18 percentage points. In 2008 it was 81% and in 2018 it was 3%. However, the group of young undecideds has increased. In 1996 it accounted for 14%, in 2013 – 18%, and in 2018 – 21%. The group of young non-believers has also grown. In the same period, in 1996 it accounted for 5%, in 2013 – 10%, and in 2018 – 17%. (Głowacki, 2019, pp. 153–158)

Thus, the above data reveals that while the religiousness of Poles in general remains at a constant, quite high level, there is a significant decrease among young believers. The differences between the younger and older generations of believers in Poland were confirmed by researchers from the Pew Research Center, who collected data for 8 years. The study showed a significant gap in the responses of younger and older people. In the replies on the importance of religion, it is 24%. 16% of people under the age of 40 admit that religion is

important to them; the same goes for 40% of older Catholics. Young Catholics also pray less often. Prayer is declared by 14% of younger people and 39% of believers over 40 years old. The age gap in prayer is therefore 25%. (Pew Research Center, 2018)

A conclusion can therefore be drawn that Polish Catholics have different approaches to faith depending on their age. The modern young generation, free from the experience of the communist system, which united today's older Catholics to fight within the Church, expects something completely different. Young people seek a personal experience of faith, they want change in the Church. They are looking for churches, ministries where they can find themselves and get involved. It is therefore almost necessary for the Church to become part of the environment in which young people live and work. To start using the tools that young believers use on a daily basis, namely social media. For it represents an ideal space that can contribute to the spiritual development of a human being.

About research on the new evangelization

Contemporary researchers of the media and theology are keen to address the issue of new forms of evangelization. They analyse this area in different dimensions and aspects. In her studies, Monika Przybysz addresses the issue of the presence of church institutions in the social media in the context of image care. He stresses that „social media should be used to teach about God and proclaim the Gospel: to bear witness to faith and hope, to deepen the faith of others, to support those in need, to build community around Jesus Christ, and they must not be used to act against God, the Gospel, the community of the Church, its own superiors, other clergy, and especially against another person”. (Przybysz, 2018, p. 150) The necessity of evangelization through social media is also noted by Father Mirosław Chmielewski. In his opinion, “[...] the Church builds the Christian community on the „digital continent”, communicating [it] up-to-date news and information and knowledge about the Catholic faith.” (Chmielewski, 2014, p. 228) In turn, Piotr Siuda notes that not only the institutional, but also the communal dimension of religion is transferred to the network, thanks to which it can become both dominant and the only form of religious experience. (Siuda, 2010, p. 12)

Pope Benedict XVI, on the other hand, encourages Christians to bring into virtual space, in a bold way, the testimony of their faith. „I would like [...] to encourage Christians to engage with confidence and with conscious and responsible creativity in the network of relationships that have become possible

in the digital age. Not just to satisfy the desire to be there, but because this network is an integral part of human life. Thanks to the network, new and more complex forms of intellectual and spiritual awareness are formed, common beliefs. Here too we are called to proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the Saviour of man and history, the one in whom all things reach their fullness (cf. EF 1,10).” (Benedict XVI, 2011)

The researcher of culture in the religious space, D. Smołucha, on the other hand, notes that the position of the Church in relation to some pastoral activities undertaken on the Internet, e.g. blogs of clergy or activities on popular social networking sites, is not definitively established. She also recalls that the Church treats the media as a tool of pre-evangelization leading to interpersonal contact with the pastor. (Smołucha, 2016, p. 143)

The above considerations have shown that the subject of evangelization on the web is an important and eagerly explored topic. However, the literature on the subject lacks a critical analysis of the available social media in the context of communication with young believers and a chance to reach them with the Word of God in the first place and return them to the group of believers, practitioners – in a longer term. Therefore, in the next part of this study the author will present such an analysis.

Analysis of selected social media as tools for conveying the faith

As the technical progress continues, the media has been transformed. Its character has changed. It has become interactive, digital, integrated, bringing young people together more often in the virtual world than in the real world. Thus, the media has become a great opportunity and a way of proclaiming the Gospel, but at the same time it has also become a challenge. Therefore, it is almost imperative that Church representatives, equipped with the ability to speak, write and be visible in order to attract the audience, use social media.

a) Facebook

Facebook is, in a way, a standard of communication for young people. Digital natives use it to establish and maintain communication, relationships and bonds. In Poland it is used by 42.3% of the population. Most often they are women – 53.5%. And the largest group of recipients are young people aged 25–34, which make up a group of 4,600,000 people. (*NapoleonCat*, 2019)

Facebook is by nature not a religious medium, but it can become an effective tool for promoting religious practice. Thanks to the possibility of combining word, image and sound on it, it has become „[...] a kind of technological

platform and a set of socio-cultural protocols through which one can speak about religion and communicate religious truths (Sierocki, 2018, p. 103).

Facebook allows for the following pastoral activities:

- **setting up a site** – fanpage, i.e. your own profile of a person, community or organization. Thanks to the ability to publish content, graphics, videos, as well as by moderating discussions, adding comments and the possibility of redirecting to other websites, shops or blogs, it offers an opportunity to reach thousands of recipients with an interesting religious message. By effectively moderating the post by the profile administrator, the message remains visible to users of the medium.
- **an event** – a subpage of a specific action. It gives the opportunity to publish information (e.g. about interesting retreats, conferences, concerts) and to invite guests, including those who are not fanpage observers.
- **live broadcast** – that is, video broadcast. It can be placed on the event page or shared on your profile. In the pastoral activity it can be used as a report e.g. from an interesting meeting of young people, social or religious events, invitation or direct communication addressed to a specific group of recipients.
- **your story** – this is the space where photos or videos are placed for a selected group of users. It's visible for 24 hours. It can serve as an opportunity to share an important message with members of the pastoral group.
- **survey** – appears as a post on your profile. Allows selection of options by recipients. It is an effective tool for examining opinions e.g. about some new pastoral idea, the need for changes in the parish or ministry, etc.
- **groups** – a place that unites users interested in similar topics, e.g. members of a pastoral group, people working around the event in the parish (church fair, retreat, food collection, etc.). The profile administrator gives users the opportunity to discuss.
- **Messenger** – the internal Facebook communicator. It enables free communication with every user of the service and facilitates communication. (Chabrzyk, Kałużyńska et al., 2020, p. 7).


As an example of effective pastoral activity on Facebook, I will use the profile “Strong in Spirit” [*“Mocni w duchu”*] – an evangelistic music band founded in 1988 by a Jesuit, Fr. Józef Kozłowski. All band members belong to the Community of the Strong in Spirit, representing different states and professions. They base their activity on elements of Ignatian spirituality and charisma. Established in June 2013, the band profile is followed by 45,156 people, while 42,517 users like the band's posts. The “Community of the Strong in Spirit” [*“Wspólnota Mocni w Duchu”*] fanpage established in December 2013 has 13,449 users and the posts have been liked 12,529 times. On their profiles, the group informs about the events they serve, broadcasts meetings,

Masses, various services, informs about the current activities of the group, evangelization trips, Ignatian retreats or Charismatic Forums. Users can also listen to the Word of God with Fr. Remi Reclaw's comment or listen to the pastor's comment/explanation on their questions about faith. (*Mocni w Duchu*, 2013)

The band also runs a subpage "Strong in spirit with prayer for healing" [*"Mocni w duchu z modlitwą o uzdrowienie"*], where the faithful can participate in monthly Holy Masses with prayer for healing celebrated in the Jesuit Church in Łódź thanks to an online transmission. The faithful also have the opportunity to send their intentions, for which the community will pray, and to make a donation. The band also created a closed Facebook group called "Strong in the spirit privately, together and separately" [*"Mocni w duchu prywatnie, razem i osobno"*] with 52 members, where they exchange information from their daily lives. (*Mocni w Duchu*, 2017)

Strong in Spirit are also the founders of the "Adoration Rescue Boat" [*"Uwielbieniowa Łódź Ratunkowa"*] profile, directed mainly to the youth of the last years of primary and secondary schools. This page is dedicated to a special evening, held once a month, during which young people can worship God strongly. The whole event is broadcast on YouTube in full HD quality. (*Mocni w Duchu*, 2015)

The activity of the Strong in Spirit is appreciated by Facebook users. The profile was rated by 68 users, giving 4.6 points out of 5. In turn 51 people left a short commentary e.g. (original record).

– „The living evangelization and the Adoration Rescue Boat works I recommend 

– „It's a good thing we've got that evangelization movement in the media.”

– The Strong in Spirit go forward in new forms of evangelization like a storm and reach where few have been or are. That's probably why they're sometimes not understood. I thank God I can participate in many MwD initiatives. It saved me, a living, committed God and a good Jesuitic formation. AMDG.”

– “I recommend the community of the Strong in Spirit because they lead a living evangelization through music, retreats and masses for healing” (*Mocni w Duchu*, 2018)

b) Twitter

Twitter in Poland is used by 6 million users, 70% of whom are aged 18–34. It is seen by users as an excellent tool to discuss current events. It allows users to send 280 characters in a message that may contain links, photos or videos with hashes, making it easier for users to group and find tweets on a given topic.

Very often many organizations decide to communicate with this tool for image reasons, treating Twitter as a press office. (Chada et al., 2020, p. 37) An example of pastoral activity can be the creation in 2013 by Pope Benedict XVI of an account on this social medium. The last entry was very interesting for users: „Thank you for your love and support. May you always experience the joy that comes from putting Christ at the centre of your life”. (Benedict XVI, 2013) Pope Francis continues his predecessor’s activity on Twitter. In his tweets he very often refers to current events in the Church and in the world. It also reminds us of the social teaching of the Church. Thus, the brief teaching of the Head of the Roman Catholic Church reaches hundreds of recipients every day. The profile of Pope Francis is followed by 11,740 users and the entries were liked by 11,625 people. (Franciszek, 2013)

c) You Tube

The You Tube service in Poland is used by 19,110,206 Internet users. On average, users spend 2 hours 28 minutes per month, which gives 2,789,576,542 views per day. Users access the service to view a variety of video content. They also add opinions about the viewed material and comment on the videos or discuss with their authors. (Grabowski et. al, 2020, p. 27)

A great example of pastoral activity using the You Tube service is the pastoral work of Fr. Adam Szustak, a Polish Dominican, an itinerant preacher whose motto of life is “Preach the Gospel to all, everywhere and in every way.” In 2014, together with a group of associates, he created a channel on You Tube called Langoustine on Palm [*Langusta na palmie*]. The service has 700,000 visitors per year, 12 million page views and 601,000 subscriptions. The service offers Dominican deliberations in shorter and longer forms, there are also reports from conferences, travel or various cyclical materials such as: Wstawaki [*morning prayers*], Miriam, Dobranocka [*evening prayers*], Whisperers or the extremely popular series #5 more minutes – Internet Advent Retreats. The Dominican has gained popularity among Internet users thanks to the comprehensible, concrete and coherent message addressed to the faithful in a different, attractive form. In his statements, he stresses that You Tube is the world’s greatest pulpit, which must be used in every possible way. (Szustak, 2014)

Together with his co-workers he created the dominikanie.pl platform where materials of fathers and other invited guests are published. Currently, the longest emitted series is Chlebak (#763 episode), which is a daily commentary on mass readings. On the platform, the faithful will also find, among other things, materials for the liturgy, Mary, prayers, retreats and materials for children.

The Holy See also has its official channel on YouTube called „Vatican Channel”. According to the spokesperson of the Holy See’s Press Office, this is „a true and tangible example of the Church’s commitment to new technologies, in order to reach audiences around the world, regardless of their nationality or culture”. (Kloch, 2014, p. 75) It is also important that the channel has an inactive commenting function. In this way, the Church’s superiors show that they accept the medium but also set hard criteria for its use.

d) Instagram

In the Polish version, the service has been operating since 2008. It is most popular among users aged 18–24, that is 2,500,000 people. In Poland, it is used by 6,614,000 recipients, which constitutes 17.4% of the total population. Instagram is an application for sharing photos and short videos. Users can observe their friends, bloggers, brands and hashtags describing the shared material. Everyone has access to their own profile and to the newsfeed, where the latest posts from friends and the profiles they are following appear. The service allows interaction by adding comments, sending private messages or liking posts by adding a heart under a photo or video. Also, through the hashtag the author of the posts can express his emotions and share the atmosphere of the place with the user. (Chabrzyk, Drapała et al., 2020, p. 18)

An example of effective pastoral activities with the help of Instagram can be the activity of Marcin Zieliński, who is a source of controversial charism in the Polish Church. He is a young man, the leader of the Community of Adoration „The Voice of the Lord” [*Wspólnota Uwielbienia „Głos Pana”*], operating at the Divine Mercy Parish in Skierniewice. He conducts retreats, evenings of glory and prayers for healing throughout Poland and many other countries around the world. He was a speaker and minister at the “Jesus at the Stadium” [*„Jezus Na Stadionie”*] event with Father John Bashobora. He also conducted charismatic forums, during which he served together with, among others: Archbishop Ryś, Fr. Mariusz Rosik, Fr. Rafał Jarosiewicz and many other clerics. The church care of the community and the ministry of M. Zieliński is exercised by the pastor Jan Rawa. The activities of the community were officially blessed by Bishop Andrzej Franciszek Dziuba, Bishop of the Łowicz diocese. (Zieliński, 2016)

Critics of the charism accuse him of not recognizing Our Lady and of sympathizing with Protestantism. In addition, a film was made available on the portal *zwiedzeni.pl*, the aim of which was to „expose” the charisma by showing its inspiration with the Toronto Blessing current or the Protestantization of the Church (*Deon.pl*, 2018). To protect M. Zieliński, there was a huge group of

consecrated and lay people who stood up for him: fr. prof. dr. hab. Mariusz Rosik, fr. dr. hab. Sławomir Pawłowski SAC, fr. dr. Przemysław Sawa, fr. Tomasz Nowak OP. They write in a special statement: „We, the undersigned presbyters, consecrated persons and lay leaders serving in the Catholic Church, wish to express our deepest regret and sadness at the recent footage posted on the net, which slanders our brother of the Catholic Community, Marcin Zieliński, in a way that is incomprehensible and unknown to Christianity [...]” (*Deon.pl*, 2018)

Marcin Zieliński's profile on Instagram is observed by 27,400 people (*Marcin Zieliński*, 2020). On his profile M. Zieliński has made 518 posts available, in which he places photos and videos of his ministry. An important element of evangelization of the charism is also the realization of the series of films „Quarter with the word” [*„Kwadransik ze słowem”*], i.e. reflections on a fragment of the Bible. So far 125 episodes have been released and 35,300 people have subscribed. (*Zieliński*, 2016). His profile does not lack testimonials in which people describe how their lives have changed after their meeting with M. Zieliński. The testimonials quote numerous stories of physical and spiritual healing and express the approval of the charismatic pastoral activity. Thanks to a simple tool, which is Instagram, the recipients enter into interpersonal relations with the user, share their emotions and insights, which in turn can encourage them to get to know and absorb the content he preaches.

It has to be remembered that social media, as a place and means of proclaiming the Word of God, may also possess weak points. First of all, the religious message may be lost among the large amount of other contents. What is important may be hidden by irrelevant posts. Secondly, many possible methods for publishing information may cause the form of a post to become more important than the message itself. In such situations, we lose the most relevant part of the religious message, which in turn leads to the faith's commercialization and treating religion in a shallow way. Christmas may be mentioned as the perfect example. We celebrate Christmas time and not the fact of Christ being born. Thus, the religious message becomes goods for sale that require proper promotion. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that social media provide an illusory sense of anonymity, which may promote the spread of groundless criticism in comments on published religious content as well as encouraging hatred in different areas. As a final point, although social media provides a certain feeling of being in a community, they should not replace direct contact with Church leaders, prayer in a community and personal presence among other Church members.

Conclusions

1. Pastors of the Catholic Church in Poland and lay people involved in the proclamation of the Word of God must seek and use new and attractive forms of social communication, because for young believers religion and faith is becoming less and less important aspects of life.

2. Different forms of websites, applications and social networks should be used in the pastoral work of the Church. For, as Pope Benedict XVI noted, they can „help modern man to experience moments of reflection and authentic questions, but also find spaces of silence, opportunities for prayer, meditation or sharing the Word of God”. (Benedict XVI, 2012, p. 7–8)

3. Facebook as a popular tool among young network users can be an effective tool for evangelization. It offers a chance to accompany the faithful in the experience of faith, makes it easier to listen to their concerns, doubts and questions. The faithful can interact with representatives of the Church and experience the testimony of faith.

4. Thanks to the concise messages posted on Twitter, users can understandably and dynamically discuss events in the Church and, as Pope Francis points out, „become an instrument to reach out to the wounded, seeking salvation and hope”. (Francis 2013)

5. You Tube is an effective pastoral tool. It gives the possibility to quickly, practically free of charge, reach an unlimited number of recipients. Polish Internet users willingly visit You Tube, not only because of the free selection of watched videos but above all because of the possibility to share their feelings and emotions. The Church can use the service to effectively proclaim official teaching in an attractive form.

6. Instagram, like other social media, collects user feedback. It is a place of interaction that can result in the expansion and strengthening of the Church’s teaching.

7. The Church needs social media because it needs faithful collaborators with the Church’s hierarchy and lay people who bear witness to a living faith and moral attitude in the media.

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Media społecznościowe jako skuteczne narzędzie duszpasterskie

Streszczenie: Wszechobecny postęp cywilizacyjny sprawia, że religia i zasady moralne stają się dla młodych ludzi coraz mniej ważnym aspektem życia. Zauważalny jest w tej grupie spadek liczby osób chodzących regularnie na niedzielną Mszę Świętą oraz modlących się. Wzrasta natomiast liczba niewierzących. Wśród młodych ludzi, określających się jako wierzący i praktykujący, zaobserwować można zmianę sposobu przeżywania wiary. Często osoby te poszukują osobistego świadectwa wiary i szczerzej komunikacji. Pragną również aktywnie uczestniczyć w życiu wspólnoty wierzących, np. przyłączając się do grup działających w mediach społecznościowych. Stąd w niniejszym artykule autorka podjęła próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy duszpasterstwo młodych za pomocą mediów społecznościowych jest skuteczne? Analizując wybrane media społecznościowe, stwierdziła, że są one skutecznym narzędziem ewangelizacji. Jako płaszczyzna doświadczania wiary, tworzą forum szczerego dzielenia się swoimi wątpliwościami, jednak najważniejszą wartością jest możliwość wchodzenia w interakcje z przedstawicielami Kościoła i doświadczanie świadectwa wiary.

Słowa kluczowe: religia, młodzi, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter.