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Using YouTube as a digital pulpit. The most influential Catholic youtubers in Spanish speaking countries: Who they are and how they communicate

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ABSTRACT

The communication of religious ideas has followed a path that is similar to the dissemination of other types of content. The Internet and social networks have enabled the appearance of new Catholic preachers with intense activity and a high number of followers on their channels. YouTube has been no exception to this communication trend. Some of the religious communicators who use this social network have in fact become the natural heirs to the former TV preachers, or televangelists. Others have adapted their religious discourse to the narratives of these channels, addressing young audiences who are familiar with the new languages. Still others have launched channels on YouTube in order to broaden the audience of their usual liturgical and clerical activities. They are the new influencers in the religious realm, capable of multiplying audiences, establishing dialogues with them, and generating engagement. This article shows the results of an analysis of the Spanish-speaking Catholic communicators with the largest number of followers on YouTube. Based on a sample of videos with the most views, conclusions have been drawn about profiles, followers, subjects, production, positioning, generating engagement, and relationships with audiences.

1. Introduction

1.1. A historical review of social influence

Social influence as an object of scientific study dates back to the first decades of the twentieth century and was especially strong after the Second World War (Weber 1947; Asch 1951; Deutsch and Gerard 1955). This phenomenon has been approached

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by different fields of study, such as psychology, sociology, market research, etc. In the last two decades of the last century, psychology accurately described the phenomena that arise in society, which can subsequently be defined as influential. Cialdini (1980) coined the term *full cycle psychology*, a process by which social researchers discover, investigate, and describe real-life events triggered by people who have the power to advocate attitudinal or behavioural changes in specific social groups. From the perspective of social impact, Latané (1981) describes the changes that occur in an individual as a result of real or imagined actions by other people. Moreover, he tries to explain such change in terms of the strength, immediacy, and number of times a person is impacted, using mathematical formulas to predict behaviour. Other authors have nuanced these and other variables (Tanford and Penrod 1984), agreeing on the existence of social influence, yet disagreeing on the algorithms used. They have also tried to identify alterations in the direction set by the influencer, from social facilitation (change in the socially acceptable direction) to social loafing (reduction of interest in the influencer or the topics discussed), to social inhibition, which is the loss of influence over a given person as a reaction to the message delivered (Witte 1990).

Although the vast majority of studies in academia have emerged from psychology and sociology, from its early stages many authors have focused their research on the implications of social influence on marketing and consumer habits (Glock and Nicosia 1963; Mancuso 1969), and the repercussions of influence and leadership on political science. During this long period, important concepts of influence have been identified, such as the following: the leader's personality and the social structure of the group, or contingency theory (F. Fiedler 2015; F. E. Fiedler 1967); leader behaviour and audience satisfaction, or path goal theory (House 1971); and communicative leadership (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2017, Kim et al. 2021). Even though all of these might seem opposed and appear to have few theoretical concurrences, they coincide when considering evidence of the effect of social influence exerted by some leaders with a certain charismatic sway over their audiences (Yetton and Crouch 1983).

Thus, influence can be defined as a form of power that some people have over certain groups, not by virtue of authority, but as a result of their own charisma through which they induce these groups to action, or to change their attitude or way of thinking (Bord 1975). The influential individual is one who presents him or herself as the centre of the communicative paradigm. More recently, Rundin and Colliander (2021) have described an influencer as 'a professional who becomes a trusted prescriber of a product or service to the general public because of their knowledge or experience in a certain field' (548). Along the same lines, the Influencer Marketing Hub defines an influencer as 'an individual who has the power to affect the purchase decisions of others due to their authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience' (Geyser 2022). Similarly, influence is identified in the definitions of other marketing authors with the impact on consumption decisions (Leung et al. 2022).

1.2. Influencers and social networks

The emergence of social networks (Boyd and Ellison 2007) has added complexity to the term *influencer*, which has obviously acquired considerable magnitude due to the variations over time in the ecosystem made up of social actors, their audiences, channels for transmitting opinion, and the domains of knowledge and influence. Therefore, it is worth highlighting the role of influencers in social networks as 'people with the potential to create engagement, generate a large number of followers, and encourage conversation' (Feijoo Fernández and Fernández Gómez 2021). According to the same authors, the most prominent influencers are on YouTube and Instagram. Influencers are a new type of endorser, or celebrity, who use their popularity to increase the impact of their participation in communications that are commercial, social, etc. (Rocha, de Oliveira, and Giraldi 2019). They also broaden and shape the attitudes of their audiences through their blog posts, tweets, and the use of other social networks (Freberg et al. 2011).

According to this approach, two taxonomies of influencers can be drawn, based on criteria of diffusion and personal profile. The first specifies the number of followers according to the classification below:

a. Micro-influencers have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers.
b. Macro-influencers have more than 100,000 followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017).
c. Mega-influencers have more than one million subscribers (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

From a more qualitative perspective, Park et al. (2021) makes a distinction between the following types of influencers: celebrity influencers are those who are already well-known by the public (actors, singers, models, television personalities, etc.); social media influencers disseminate their content through social networks and are perceived as experts in fashion, sports, games, etc.; and micro-influencers reach a smaller audience, also through social networks, but with a very strong impact and influence on their community of followers. In the latter case, their activity is based on a very attractive and recognisable personal brand (King, Abo-Zena, and Weber 2017), which leaves a unique imprint on their content or communicative style (Abidin 2016; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson 2020). This latter category of opinion leader, who assumes an informational role and generates strong engagement with their social media channels (Campbell and Farrell 2020), is the influencer that we will address in this article.

1.3. The new religious influencers

Influencers exist in many fields, including religion (Ozorak 1989). However, until now few studies have analysed the content of profiles that can be classified as religious, possibly due to the fact that descriptive quantitative and qualitative research is also scarce with regard to academic studies related to religion and the media in the digital realm (Campbell and Vitullo 2016). There is also a call for new typologies to

define the conceptual framework from which the so-called *digital religion* can be outlined (Siuda 2021).

Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature on influential digital personalities in Islam in both Muslim and Western countries from a wide variety of perspectives (El Naggar 2018; Peterson 2013; Mosemghvdlishvili 2013; Sorgenfrei 2021; Nisa 2018; Pemberton and Takhar 2021). From a more theoretical outlook, the work of Heidi Campbell (2021) should be cited, specifically her research on the concept of religious authority in the digital realm. Moreover, research on Catholic communicators on social networks can also be found, including the work of Kathryn Frances Schneider (2020) regarding the content of the messages transmitted by Catholic youtubers Emily Wilson and Father Mike Schmitz. Other researchers, including Lilia Carpio Jiménez, Patricio Barrazueta, Andrea Sinche (Carpio, Barrazueta, and Sinche 2019), and Abel Suing (Suing and Carpio 2020) have analysed the channels of Reginaldo Manzotti (Brazil), Lizzie Estrella Reezay (USA), Daniel Pajuelo (Spain), and Polish communicator Adam Szustak. In any case, all of these studies are limited, both in scope and methodology.

2. Approach and methodology

2.1. Sample selection

The aim of this study is to address the presence of Catholic communicators on social networks, and more specifically on YouTube channels. A triple segmentation criterion has been used to define the specific object of observation. The first was to identify the social network on which to focus the analysis. Secondly, Spanish was chosen as the language of communication, over other criteria such as geography, in order propose a hypothetically common geo-cultural sphere, or space, from which to start (Staedler 2015). Thirdly, the number of followers has been taken into account to ensure that the actual capability of influence has an objectively quantifiable foundation.

As a result of this process, the main YouTube channels of Catholic communicators who target Spanish-speaking audiences have been identified. For the selection, we have considered only those where the name of the channel itself corresponds to that of a specific individual, or a personal brand (Peters 1997; Chen, Rui, and Whinston 2021), thereby discarding institutional channels. YouTube was chosen due to its status as the second most popular social network, with 2.562 billion users, and the most common for audio-visual content, according to data from the Digital 2022 report by the consultancy firm Hootsuite (2022). In addition, the channels have open access, and the study of content is accessible to anyone, which is not the case in networks such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc., where blocked entry or the acceptance of users by the network administrator determines access to all content. In an attempt to reduce the sample to an operational size, and within the range described for the identification of macro influencers, the threshold was set at 200,000 subscribers.

The search was carried out between January and February of 2022 in two waves, and then reviewed in June of 2022. The first step was to search for different terms

contained in the name of the channel or in its description (e.g. religion, religious values, church, gospel, eternal life, salvation, faith, Jesus Christ, etc.). A high number of results were obtained from this inquiry, although very few channels reached the figure of 200,000 subscribers. In a second wave, we searched for terms (both in Spanish and English) with which the promoters of the channels themselves could be identified, such as father, priest, reverend, bishop, sister, brother, cardinal, layperson, and non-religious individual. Once the channels that met the criteria had been identified, the three videos with the highest number of visits were selected for the study. The result of this process was the identification of 16 youtubers and the selection of 48 videos in total.

2.2. Process of analysis

Once the sample had been delimited, the following aspects were analysed:

1. Formal narrative (format, audio-visual narrative structure, composition, angle, and plot structure).
2. Visual self-reference (use of religious symbols, attire, and setting).
3. Interactivity and participation (in the video and on the channel)
4. Content of the channel (topics addressed, approach).

Two sheets were designed for data collection. In the first, data related to the formal aspects of each video were collected through direct observation, grouping all the variables that could be observed into two blocks:

1. Variables related to the channel (year launched, number of videos uploaded, number of followers, etc.)
2. Variables specific to each video:
   a. Production and development (dominant type of shot, editing, use of sound effects, visual identity, etc.)
   b. Presentation of the youtuber (attire and presence of religious symbols)
   c. Participation and engagement (number of views, hashtags on the title, number of likes, number of comments, etc.)

On the second observation sheet, the main and secondary topics were defined through content analysis. This practice is methodologically based on obtaining valid and reproducible data within their contexts of use (Krippendorff 2019; Bardin 1991; Berelson 1952; Holsti 1969).

Similarly, the objective and quantifiable data contained in each message have been systemised (Naccarato and Neuendorf 1998). Subsequently, statistical studies were carried out with regard to some basic variables, establishing correlations between the amount of time each video stayed on the channel and the number of visits it received, along with a comparative study of the different values obtained.

The most difficult part of the methodology was establishing a list of categories and subcategories that would comprise the observation sheet. To do so, we started with

the specific features of traditional religious information, for which there is abundant academic literature. This decision was supported by the following statement: 'In journalistic information, we find more aspects related to the mediations that lead to mystery and the absolute, which is the centre of religious experience, than to the core of the religious event itself' (Cordero Morales 2008, 76). Moreover, an analogy was established by verifying the interest that religious news arouses within the mass media, as acknowledged by Laporte (2004) and Cordero Morales (2008).

Next, the criteria for analysing religious news were revised (Contreras 2004) and expanded according to current doctrinal issues, church life, etc., which are recurring themes in the new religious spaces on the Internet (Cordero Morales 2008). The catalogue was initially too descriptive and the categories too detailed, so the latter were regrouped, and the meaning of the observation concepts was broadened so that they were capable of encompassing a higher number of specific realities. In this way, the observation sheet (see Table 1) was grouped into eighteen categories, each of which was subdivided into various subcategories according to the semantic groupings obtained from the presence of religious news in the media (Diez and Pérez-Dasilva 2020).

Once the observation table had been delimited, the fieldwork was carried out independently by each researcher on three different observation sheets. Afterward, the comparison of results showed a very high rate of coincidence that reached 94% of the items that were at least included in the columns pertaining to the main topic, secondary topics, or observations. The final result was reached through work aimed at obtaining consensus in which the criteria for choosing one theme over another as the main topic was presented, as well as the inclusion or exclusion of conflicting items. With this methodological design, we tried to check the following working hypotheses:

H1. There is a single cultural space of study among communicators of Catholic content defined by the use of the Spanish language.

H2. The communicators selected are influencers to the extent that they attract followers, generate engagement, and induce conversation through their social networks.

H3. The hypothetical religious influencers generate 'virtual parishioners' that broaden their sphere of influence and scope of their opinions.

H4. Social media activity displays distinctive features of traditional clerical preaching in the Catholic Church, and such attributes can be seen as models of communication and influence.

3. Results

3.1. Profiles and reach of the youtubers analysed

The results of the search produced a list of 16 Catholic youtubers with channels in Spanish, who have between 373,000 and 1,630,000 subscribers (see Table 2). Among them, there is only one woman, Sister Glenda (*La Hermana Glenda*) with nearly one million subscribers. The others include five Mexicans, four Colombians, three Spaniards, one US citizen, one Venezuelan, one Honduran, and one El Salvadoran.

Table 1. Observation sheet for the topic categories.

Category	Subcategory
Church current affairs	Sexual abuse. News of Catholic religious movements, orders, and groups. Church property and wealth. Canonisation and beatification. Schisms or separations. Corruption. Papal documents. Church financial scandals. Deaths. Appointments and dismissals. Other conflicts with hierarchical authority. The role of women. Church-state relations. Relations within the church, schisms. Synods, Councils. Transparency. The Vatican. Papal travel. Other.
The Bible	Exegesis and commentary on biblical texts. Historical accuracy and creationism. Interpretation of Holy Scripture. Canonical books. Old Testament characters. The life of Jesus and the New Testament. Other.
Conversion	Reconciliation to the Catholic Church from other faiths. Rediscovery of faith. Return to religious practice. Other.
The Church and religious culture	History of the Church. Lives of the saints. Religious art. Sacred music. History of evangelization. Other.
Ecumenism and other religious realities	Liturgical acts of the Catholic Church or other confessions. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Oriental religions. Christian confessions. Islam. Other religions. Relations between the Catholic Church and other religions. Sects. Other topics.
Spirituality and sacraments	Devotions. Prayer materials. Mortification. Prayer. Other devotions. Practice of the sacraments. Virtues (moral, theological). Other.
Eschatology and supernatural life	Angels. Apparitions. Heaven and Hell. Supernatural phenomena. Satan, demonic possession, exorcism, demons. Satanism, witchcraft, tarot, divination. Other.
Philosophy and anthropology	Addiction (drugs, alcohol, etc.). Capitalism. Human rights. Education. Fundamentalism. Gender ideology. Childhood. Youth. Freedom. Marxism. Metaphysics. Modernism. Women. Rationalism. Faith-culture relationship (science vs. religion). Meaning of human existence. Subjectivism. Values. Other anthropological themes.
Liturgy	Religious songs and music. Languages for religious use. Liturgy of the Mass. Clerical attire. Other liturgical topics.
Marriage	Divorced people and their participation in church life. Divorced persons and receiving the sacraments. Purpose. Indissolubility. Birth. Marriage annulment. Other matrimonial issues. Married life. Union. Other issues.
Nature and the environment	Pollution. Animal welfare. Exploitation of resources. Other.
Other doctrinal themes	Dogmatic theology. Fundamental theology and other doctrinal issues. Sacramental theology. Christology, Mariology, One and Triune God, etc. Other.
Religious broadcasts	Mass. Holy rosary. Eucharistic adoration. Communal prayer. Processions. Other.
Priesthood	Celibacy. Female priesthood. Priestly vocation. Priestly mission. Other.
Sex	Adultery, fornication. Birth control, contraception. Sexual diversity, homosexuality, bisexuality. Masturbation. Other sexual relations. Premarital sex. Transgender issues. Other.
Society, work, justice	Social action. Missionary activity and church missions. Confessionalism. Democracy. Dictatorships. Economy. Immigration. Social integration. Migration. Disability. Radical movements. Nationalism. Unemployment. Poverty. Politics. Racism. Solidarity. Sustainability. Wages. Xenophobia. Other.
Life and human dignity	Abortion. Social action. Seniors. Birth control, contraception. Illness, pain. Euthanasia, Experiments using embryos. War. Bionic implants and robot-men. Disability. Capital punishment. Genetic programming. Suicide. Torture. Transhumanism. Other life and dignity issues.
Other	Historical or non-religious current affairs. Others not categorised.

Table 2. 16 Catholic youtubers with channels in Spanish.

Channel name	Name of the youtuber	Profile	Broadcasting country	Subscribers 09/06/2022
Canal del Padre Fortea	José Antonio Fortea	Priest	Spain	248,000
Padre Neftalí Roger	Neftalí Rogel	Priest	El Salvador	260,000
Padre Adolfo	Adolfo Güémez	Priest	Mexico	290,000
Padre Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros	Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros	Priest	Mexico	307,000
Rafael Díaz	Rafael Díaz	Lay person	USA	343,000
Padre Gabriel Quintero	Gabriel Hernando Quintero González	Priest	Colombia	373,000
Padre Bernardo Moncada	Bernardo Moncada	Priest	Colombia	381,000
Fray Nelson	Nelson Medina	Priest	Colombia	413,000
Padre Sam	Francisco Samuel Bonilla Amaya	Priest	Honduras	553,000
P. José de Jesús Aguilar Valdés	José de Jesús Aguilar Valdés	Priest	Mexico	1,010,000
Hermana Glenda Oficial	Glenda Valeska Hernández Aguayo	Catholic Nun	Spain	1,120,000
Padre Carlos Yepes	Carlos Yepes	Priest	Colombia	1,200,000
SMDANI	Daniel Pajuelo	Priest	Spain	1,230,000
Padre Luis Toro	Luis Toro Jaimes	Priest	Venezuela	1,360,000
Padre Sergio	Sergio Argüello	Priest	México Mexico	1,510,000
Padre José Arturo López Cornejo	José Arturo López Cornejo	Priest	Mexico	1,630,000

3.2. Features of Catholic communication on YouTube

From the information provided by the youtubers themselves, either through their channel or other networks, several characteristic features can be identified that could be a starting point for a more in-depth study of the profiles of Catholic influencers.

3.2.1. A sense of mission

Most of the youtubers analysed explicitly point to an evangelical mission that inspires their presence on social networks. In some cases, this mission is directly integrated into the charisma of the congregation to which they belong, such as Nelson Medina and the Order of Preachers (*Orden de Predicadores*) (https://fraynelson.com/), or Sergio Argüello and the Society of Saint Paul (*Sociedad de San Pablo*) (https://padresergio.org/quien-es-el-padre-sergio/). In the case of Sister Glenda (*Hermana Glenda*), the evangelical mission produces a new personal charisma. She left the *Congregación de las Hermanas de la Consolación* (Congregation of the Sisters of Consolation), where she remained for nearly two decades, to dedicate herself to a pastoral life of evangelization through music and the testimony of her life, after being consecrated into the *Ordo Virginis* under the authority of the Bishop of the Terrasa diocese, Barcelona, Spain. (https://www.hnaglenda.org/algo-mas).

Other influencers describe their evangelical mission either in one of the videos uploaded to YouTube, or in a general way in other media such as Facebook, personal websites, and others. This is the case of Honduran priest Samuel Bonilla (*Padre Sam*), who proclaims the following from his website (padresam.org): 'I try to obey the instruction of my Lord in Matthew 28:19; "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel." This is the digital world and it cannot be exempt from the greatest news in

history; the Gospel'. Mexican priest José Arturo López Cornejo expresses his vocation in the following way: 'God has shown me the way to serve in evangelization through social networks and […] I carry out this ministry by entrusting myself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus of my land, Mexticacán' (facebook.com/PadreArturoCornejo/). For his part, Spanish priest Daniel Pajuelo (SmDani) specifies his mission on YouTube in terms of 'building bridges with culture, especially with non-believers or people who are far from the Church' (https://www.last.fm/es/music/SmDani/+wiki).

3.2.2. Multi-channel and multimedia activity

Being present on more than one channel on the Internet is a common feature of all the youtubers analysed, some of whom also have a multimedia presence in offline broadcasting channels, such as radio and television. The most prominent case is possibly that of Colombian priest Carlos Yepes. He himself recounts how he felt inspired by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel in the modern Areopagus during Pope John Paul II's visit to Colombia in 1986. A lawyer by profession, he was ordained as a priest in 1993 and worked in the Communications Department of the Colombian Conference of Bishops. In 2010, he launched the production company *Amén Comunicaciones*, whose mission is to be the 'media apostolate for a New Evangelization' (https://padrecarlosyepes.com/). Mexican priest José de Jesús Aguilar Valdés also has a distinctly multimedia profile, with activities as varied as musical composition, dance, stage design, and acting. He is Canon of the Archdiocese Cathedral of Mexico, and in September of 2021 he was given the 'Golden Microphone' award by the National Association of Mexican Broadcasters (*Asociación Nacional de Locutores de México*) for his media career (https://padrejose.mx/).

Several of these figures have profiles on various social networks, or have developed a strategy of being present on them by integrating their communication and linking some networks with others. Some youtubers also foster direct communication with their followers by WhatsApp. Among all the youtubers, a unique case is that of Rafael Díaz, whose presence on social media is so difficult to track that this obstacle might be an intentional strategy. The following table (Table 3) shows the multiplatform presence of each youtuber.

3.2.3. Institutional link

From the analysis of internet profiles, the youtubers can be classified according to their affiliation, participation, and membership in official areas of the Catholic Church. The majority are either linked to parishes in their respective countries or are members of institutions or entities of the Catholic Church. Among the former are the following: Francisco Samuel Bonilla, priest of the Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa in Honduras; José Antonio Fortea, priest of the Diocese of Alcalá de Henares; Gabriel Quintero, priest of the Archdiocese of Manizales in Colombia; Carlos Yepes, priest of the Parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Medellín, Colombia; José de Jesús Aguilar Valdés, Canon of the Archdiocese Cathedral of Mexico; Arturo Cornejo, diocesan priest in San Juan Bautista de Acatlan, of the diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa; Luis Toro, of the diocese of San Cristobal in Táchira, Venezuela; and Neftalí Rogel, of the parish of San Antonio in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. Among the latter, we have

Table 3. Multiplatform activity.

YouTube channel	Personal web/blog	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Others
Fray Nelson	✓	✓	✓	✓	Cloud Spreaker Spotify
Padre Sam	✓	✓			
Padre Fortea	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hermana Glenda	✓	✓	✓	✓	WhatsApp Spotify Apple Music
Padre Adolfo	✓	✓	✓	✓	WhatsApp Spotify Apple Podcast
Padre Sergio	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rafael Díaz				✓	
Padre Gabriel Quintero	✓	✓	✓	✓	Telegram WhatsApp
Padre Bernardo Moncada	Without access	✓	✓	✓	TikTok
Padre Carlos Yepes	✓	✓	✓	✓	Pinterest WhatsApp Telegram
Padre José de Jesús Aguilar Valdés	✓	✓	✓	✓	
SM Dani	✓	✓	✓	✓	Twitch YT Gamer Spotify Apple Music Deezer
Padre Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Padre José Arturo López Cornejo		✓			TikTok Spotify
Padre Luis Toro	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Padre Neftalí Roger	✓	✓	✓	✓	Spotify Apple Podcasts

identified the following: Nelson Medina, of the Order of Preachers; Glenda Valeska Hernández Aguayo, *Ordo Virginis* of the diocese of Terrasa; Sergio Argüello, a Pauline priest; Adolfo Güemes and Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros, both of whom are members of the congregation of the Legionaries of Christ; and Daniel Pajuelo, a priest of the Society of Mary (Marianists). This institutional link between the activity carried out on social networks and the pastoral activity in the offline world can be observed in the majority of the influencers analysed, many of whom transfer typically in-person events and formats to YouTube, such as liturgical celebrations, prayer and worship, sermons, homilies, catechetical sessions, concerts, and even apologetic debates.

Depending on whether or not this institutional link exists, it is possible to distinguish a second group of youtubers, which includes layman Rafael Díaz, for whom no institutional link has been found in the analysis of his presence on social networks, and priest Bernardo Moncada, who describes himself as a travelling preacher.

As we have seen, among all the youtubers analysed, only one is a layperson. If preaching consists of 'speaking in the name of God' (Pierce 2013), this role is reserved for consecrated members of the Church. Moreover, to the extent that the networks make it possible to expand this preaching mission, they are transformed

into digital pulpits with their own specific purpose that is different from other ways of communicating religious content.

3.2.4. Communional link

Obtaining conclusions in relation to the orthodox/heterodox nature of content posted by the diverse influencers on their channels goes beyond the objectives, approach, and potential of this study. However, one can observe the extent to which the new *Areopaguses* also arouse controversy in their relationship with doctrinal orthodoxy and obedience to the church hierarchy. A preliminary question is, who is entitled to use the label 'Catholic' when communicating through social media? It seems clear that such identification is not as crucial when the dominant feature of the communicators' profile is their status as members of the clergy, and when they present themselves to their followers as such. In these cases, if hierarchical superiors perceive that the communicator in question deviates, in content or spirit, from the path of orthodoxy and church communion, perhaps the communicator will be asked to close his channel and cease his activity. This is what happened to priest Francisco Samuel Bonilla Amaya, who on 31 July 2020 ceased broadcasting out of 'obedience to the Church', as he himself explained in a video published a few months afterward.

A very different situation is that of Rafael Díaz, whose YouTube channel displayed the label of 'Catholic Preacher' on the screen until April of 2022, which has subsequently disappeared after the Bishop of Knoxville banned a conference promoted by this lay preacher. Rafael Díaz was also prohibited from presenting himself as a 'Catholic preacher' for speaking 'disapprovingly' of Pope Francis, and for 'having wrongly portrayed the Catholic faith'.[1]

3.2.5. Formal narrative

The diversity of formats is one of the characteristics that can be found in the sample analysed. Firstly, this is reflected in the length of the videos, which range from 3 min for a video of Father Gabriel Quintero to 3 h and 3 min for one by Luis Toro. Of the 48 videos analysed, 18 are between 11 and 30 min long, and 14 last from 1 to 2 h.

Regarding the location of the recordings, 13 of the clips were recorded inside churches; the rest were recorded in halls, auditoriums, and sports arenas. Four other videos were filmed in actual locations, such as the Holy Land or other sacred places. In addition, four others contain only a still image accompanying an audio, thus turning YouTube into another podcast channel.

Of the 16 channels analysed, only three do not have visual identification in any of their videos, such as digital on-screen graphics or beginning and end captions. These include the channels of SmDani, Fray Nelson and Padre Fortea. However, this does not seem to affect the number of subscribers or views, as SmDani is always among the highest positions. No special emphasis is placed on artistic design beyond flowers in the church or the use of a few simple colours. In terms of audio-visual production, nearly three out of four videos use mostly the medium shot, whereas the rest use a wide angle. In 36 of the 48 videos, there is no camera movement at all, and in another four only the zoom feature is used. In 18 videos there is very simple editing, which is nearly always used to include archive images. Regarding voice features, only

Sister Glenda, Father Carlos Yepes, and Father José de Jesús use voice-over in some of their videos. The rest have been recorded with direct sound. The only ones that use sound effects are SmDani and Sister Glenda. All the videos include music, although in the case of Father Bernando Moncada, the music only appears at the beginning and end of his videos. Rafael Díaz, Father Fortea, Friar Nelson and Father Luis Toro do not use any music at all.

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that all the productions reviewed are amateur in nature, yet they display varying degrees of quality in the use of resources and handling of audio-visual language, with SmDani standing out as the most proficient.

3.2.6. Religious identification

All the influencers examined use their own name as a channel identifier, except for Spanish priest Daniel Pajuelo, who uses the pseudonym SmDani. Moreover, of the 15 youtubers analysed who are clerics of the Catholic Church, he is the only one who does not explicitly mention his status as priest in his channel name. All the others specifically mention their position, both in the case of secular priests as well as members of the congregations. Of the influencers who are priests or members of the clergy, a total of 11 appear in religious or clerical vestments on the cover of their channel or wear religious regalia. Luis Toro, Neftalí Rogel and Arturo Cornejo are shown in secular attire, and SmDani wears a black sweatshirt with the YouTube logo. Thus, the majority of youtubers expressly state their ecclesiastical status. Furthermore, a majority of the youtubers include religious symbols on their homepage, such as a crucifix, the Bible, or images of Jesus Christ. Altogether, these symbols are present in 12 of the 16 channels. Religious symbols also predominate in the content of the videos analysed. In fact, crucifixes, images of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, rosaries, and other emblems appear in 34 of the 48 videos.

3.2.7. Interactivity and engagement

Although a certain correlation can be seen between the number of subscribers to the channel and the number of views of each video, this does not occur in all cases. For example, the Official Sister Glenda channel ranks sixth in number, but the three videos analysed are in higher positions (1, 2 and 4, respectively). On the other extreme, Father Carlos Yepes' channel ranks fifth in number of subscribers, yet his three videos with the highest number of views are in the lowest positions, at 40th, 43rd and 44th, respectively. These findings might suggest the possibility that some Catholic communicators have a stable following for their channel, while others are able to occasionally expand their reach beyond the regular subscriber base.

No correlation has been found between the number of views each video achieves and the length of the videos: among the most viewed videos are those with a length of less than 10 min and those that last more than 1 h. Nor has a relationship been

Table 4. Highest number of videos on the channel.

Position according to number of subscribers	Name	No. of videos on the channel
9	Fray Nelson	11,050
5	Padre Carlos Yepes Oficial	7,880
8	Padre Sam	4,545

found between the number of videos accessible through a channel and the number of its subscribers. In fact, the three youtubers with the highest number of videos on their channel are not among the most followed (see Table 4).

Regarding the number of likes obtained by each video, the results show that there are significant differences between the communicators in terms of their ability to generate clear support from their followers. Among the youtubers with the strongest capability of obtaining the highest conversion rates from views to likes are SmDani (Daniel Pajuelo), Fray Nelson, Father Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros, and Father Sergio. Moreover, at an even higher level is Catholic preacher Rafael Díaz, who obtains 7.21% of the likes out of the total aggregate number of views of the three selected videos.

In terms of the number of comments generated (in percentages), and summing up the aggregate number of views of the three videos, those who generated the highest number of comments in relation to the views of their videos were Father Gabriel Quintero and SmDani, followed by Father Fortea and Rafael Díaz.

3.3. Content

3.3.1. Main issues

Surprisingly, despite the considerable number of categories and the detailed nature of the subcategories proposed, the topics are grouped around themes that coincide with each other, yet not with the most current, *hottest*, nor most anticipated news in the press, radio and television, according to the aforementioned studies. Thus, issues of spiritual and sacramental life stand out, appearing in 33% of the videos; those related to eschatology and supernatural existence are present in 21% of the clips; culture related to the Church and religion as well as uncategorized topics appear in 8% of the videos; non-categorized doctrinal issues are present in 6%; and topics related to philosophy, anthropology, and conversion appear in 4% of the clips analysed. Finally, church news, liturgy, marriage, ecumenism, religious broadcasting, social issues, and the priesthood were present in 2% of the videos. None of the other categories appeared, either as a main nor secondary topic.

3.3.2. Subcategories

Agreement among the main themes becomes fragmented in the analysis of the subcategories, where there is strong divergence. The subcategories that appear most frequently are eschatology and spiritual life at 13%; other topics of spirituality and sacraments appear at the rate of 8%; and topics such as prayer, church history, Heaven and Hell, and supernatural phenomena appear in 5% of the cases. None of the other subcategories reach a frequency of 3%. Moreover, it is surprising that there is hardly any overlap with current affairs issues such as financial scandals, sexual abuse, and certain doctrinal and moral problems such as sexual relations, marriage, the role of women in the church, and so on. The only exception is an entry by Fray Nelson on sexual abuse and celibacy, and their relationship with social justice.

Thus, among the issues of spiritual and sacramental life there is a considerable group of Catholic youtubers, including Father Gabriel Quintero, Father Neftalí Rogel,

and Father Adolfo who preach on forgiveness, suggestions for making a proper confession, steps for conversion, healing, rediscovering the faith, and Lent. On several occasions, these matters are linked to the workings of the Holy Spirit, to his gifts, or to the role of angels in the spiritual life of men.

In terms of eschatology, the following themes stand out: Arriving in Heaven or Hell as a consequence of human acts; Satan and his war to obtain the damnation of every human being; demonic possession linked to certain addictions such as alcohol and drugs; exorcism linked to prayer and penance, such as the blessing of the Blood of Christ; present-day paganism together with an analysis of Halloween, witchcraft, and tarot cards as pagan rituals; the study of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of divine punishment due to human sin; and the end of the world and the times of persecution of the church foretold in the apocalypse. These are the favourite topics of Father Fortea, who occasionally uses a somewhat apocalyptic stage design, as well as SmDani, although the latter has a radically different point of view that remains in permanent contact with modern culture and music. Priests Bernardo Moncada and Arturo Cornejo also preach on these same topics.

As far as supernatural phenomena are concerned, recurring sub-topics include the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Fatima (Portugal), and those referring to the fulfilment of the secrets entrusted by the Virgin Mary to Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco. Rafael Díaz devotes special attention to such phenomena, adding opinions in relation to current church affairs and the government of the Church from a position that claims to be neutral, yet he is openly critical of part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Finally, Father Gabriel Quintero broadcasts an interview on the healings that God is performing today.

Another relevant topic is the thematic subcategory of spirituality, in which Father Sergio, Father Luis Toro, Father Adolfo, and Father Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros address the relationship with God in prayer and the Eucharist as the main traits of Christians, as well as the recitation of the holy rosary and devotion to the Virgin Mary. Along the same lines, the content of Sister Glenda's musical interpretations, in which she speaks lyrically about the experience of God's love can also be included, as well as that of Father Neftalí Rogel, who uses a stationary camera that focuses on the sacred receptacle, alternating between first person prayer toward God and songs of praise and adoration.

Finally, diverging from the subject matter chosen by most of the youtubers, the role of Father José de Jesús stands out. In a cultural-religious framework, he dedicates several videos to a tour of the Garden of Olives, to the house of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus, and to the Convent of San Giovanni Rotondo, where Saint Pio of Pietrelcina lived.

The following table lists the topics and sub-topics addressed (Table 5). In this section, it should be emphasised that the study undertaken has limitations in terms of the treatment and assessment of the topics. In order to carry out a more meaningful analysis, it would be necessary not only to broaden the scope of the formal content analysis carried out so far, but above all, to carry out a discourse analysis using other types of methodological tools, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 5. Topics of the videos analysed.

Topics	Subtopics
Church current affairs	Schism and separation
	Intra-ecclesiastical relations, schisms.
	Doctrinal confusion
	Persecution of Christians
	Sexual abuse
	Celibacy and the priesthood
The Church and religious culture	House of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus
	Father Pio's House in Pietralcina (Italy)
	Stations of the Cross in Jerusalem
	The Mount of Olives
Ecumenism and other religious realities	Christian confessions
	Ecumenism and other religious realities
Eschatology and supernatural life	The end of the world
	Heaven and Hell
	Guardian Angels
	Exorcism
	Divine punishment and the coronavirus
	The apocalypse
	The third secret of Fatima
	The fourth secret of Fatima
	Paganism. Pagan customs
Philosophy and anthropology	Violence. Anger.
	Repression
	The meaning of human existence
	Addiction. Drugs. Alcohol
	Social justice.
Liturgy	Liturgical seasons. Lent
Marriage	Love as the foundation of marriage
Other doctrinal themes	Jesus Christ overcomes death.
	A woman's love for God
	Hatred of religion
	Criticism of Christianity
Sex	Sexual diversity, homosexuality, bisexuality
	Sexual abuse
Other doctrinal themes	Maryology. Devotion to the Virgin Mary
	The Holy Spirit
Spiritual and sacramental life	Rediscovery of faith.
	Conversion. Steps to conversion
	Reflection on Lent
	God's help
	The struggle against Satan
	Healing prayer
	Exposition with the Blessed Sacrament
	Sacramental confession
	The Eucharist
	Morning prayer
	The Holy Rosary
	Trust in God
	The sign of the cross, the sign of Christians.

3.4. Accumulated and average number of views

With *Nada es imposible para Ti* (Nothing is impossible for you), Sister Glenda by far surpasses all other communicators, reaching 33 million views with her 12-min video about surrendering the fears of life to God, recorded at a concert in the Dominican Republic in September of 2011. Sister Glenda's other two videos analysed achieved between 13.8 and 9.6 million views. Thus, it can be inferred that the Christian song format described above is the most popular by far. Moreover, the second category of
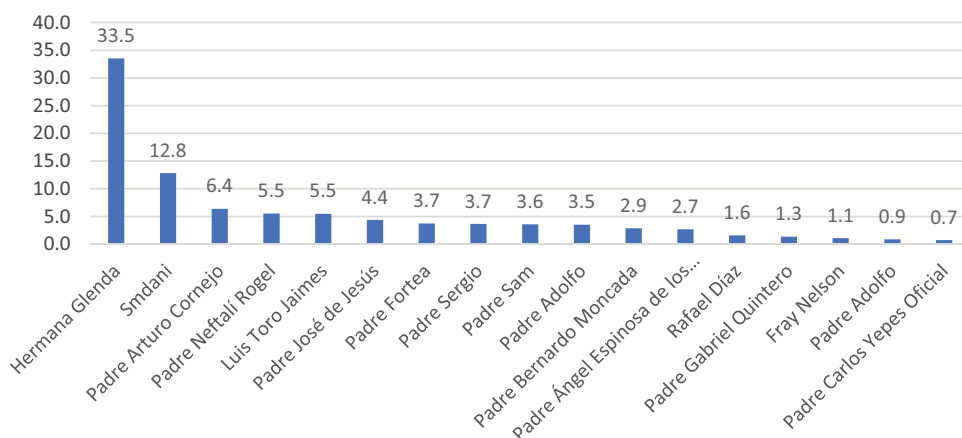
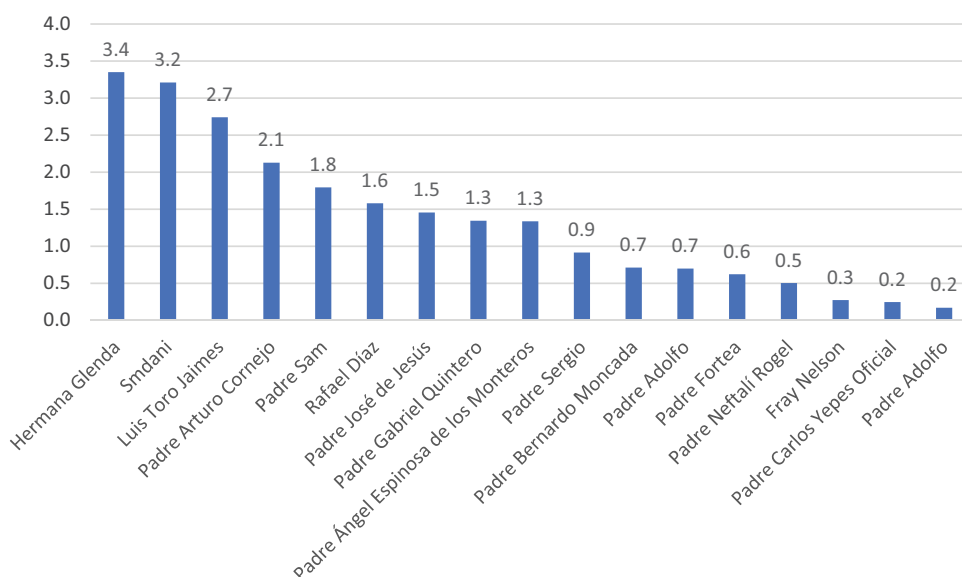**Figure 1.** Videos with the highest number of views (in millions).

Figure 2. Average number of views per year for the most successful videos (in millions).

views is only reached by one author and one other video: SmDani's reaction to Canserbero's rap song about his time in Hell, which reached 12.8 million views. Thus, it can be concluded that as a means of evangelization, music engages large audiences (see Figure 1).

Concerning the number of views obtained by each video, one of the factors that needs to be addressed is the large number of differences among the publication dates of each of the videos studied. Thus, it should be noted that YouTube suggests content to its users according to the interests they express by means of algorithms that encourage consumption. Therefore, the length of time a video is available has a significant influence on the cumulative number of views. To analyse this factor, an

index has been designed with weighting placed on the number of views in relation to the time the video is available, which helps to differentiate the audience of each of the authors. If P is the number of accumulated views/years on the channel, a new perspective is obtained in which a first group can clearly be seen where Sister Glenda ($P = 3.4$) and SmDani ($P = 3.2$) exceed 3 million views per year, and Luis Toro ($P = 2.7$) reaches nearly 3 million views per year (see Figure 2).

3.5. Modes of argumentation

Concerning the forms of argumentation, we found a strong predominance of dissertations without structured reasoning (62% of the videos analysed), with a weak or diffuse structure, and presentations lacking support from authoritative documentary sources. Most of the discourse is quite inspirational and more typical of charismatic oratory (Fernández 1978; O'Connor 1973) rather than traditional preaching. Among those who use experiential argumentation (16%), and whose discourse is always supported by input from real life experiences, are Sister Glenda, Daniel Pajuelo (SmDani), and Father Bernardo Moncada. Only in 9% of the videos analysed is there documentary argumentation: in this regard, Father Fortea's channel stands out, providing a differentiating feature of an academic nature. The apologetic performances are especially unique (Sánchez 2021; Lonergan 1972), which are carried out by Father Luis Toro in his debates with Protestant pastors. In these oratorical duels with an audience, biblical citations and their personal interpretation by each of the participants is the only basis of argument for receiving public acclaim.

3.6. Tone and stance

As for the position of the youtubers studied, a strong assertive tone is seen in most of the presentations (82%), which are predominantly of a pedagogical or apologetic nature, with a strong doctrinal emphasis. In his interviews, Daniel Pajuelo uses an exceptionally open and conversational tone. It is striking that there is no clearly critical position expressed by any of the youtubers except for Rafael Díaz, who in some of his discourse has criticized the position or opinions of church authorities or other clerics as a digression within the main topic of his dissertation. Finally, Sister Glenda uses emotional argumentation through music in the style of Christian singer-songwriters, Christian folk musicians, and contemporary Christian musicians (Kopanski 2021). However, unlike the evangelical Protestant music from which the genre derives, or contemporary Catholic music descended from it, Sister Glenda inserts discourses prior to or interspersed with the songs that express experiential content regarding prayer or the Christian life. However, it is less sentimental than in other types of Christian music, and is within the transcendental model proposed by the taxonomy of Godoy and Danielson (2017).

4. Conclusions

4.1. Language as a key element in building a common geo-cultural space

Regarding the first hypothesis of whether it is possible to speak of a common geo-cultural space defined by language, which allows the study of Spanish-speaking religious influencers to be approached collectively, the results obtained point to the existence of cultural differences that go beyond language as an identifying cultural feature. Specifically, it can be seen that the expressive styles, some of which come close to being a show, are more typical of American televangelists. Moreover, such styles are quite appealing in Latin America, while Spanish youtubers prefer restrained ways of expression, a much broader variety of topics, and in the case of SmDani, even secular issues. Moreover, in America the dialectic between Catholics and Protestants has a strong presence, yet it is non-existent in Spain. There are also live audiences in the case of youtubers from Latin America, which is not even proposed in the Spanish cases analysed. Likewise, the stage settings differ, thereby bringing the Latin American genre closer to that of North American televangelism. However, the scope of the present research is quite limited, and much more detailed work is needed in order to correlate the global duality of language and the Catholic religion with other local variables of an historical, structural and social nature, in order to obtain more substantial conclusions.

4.2. Catholic influencers: conversation, interaction, and engagement

In contrast to the classification of influence through social networks based on criteria related to reach, or the number of followers attained, the research herein is based on a broader concept. As well as the number of followers, an additional requirement is the ability to establish relationships involving interaction and conversation, which leads to a connection, or engagement, between youtubers and their followers. The second hypothesis proposed in this research transferred this notion of the influencer to the realm of Catholic youtubers, assuming that the aforementioned features of interaction, conversation and engagement are also present among them. This hypothesis has been validated, yet not in all cases, because once the different features of each channel were analysed, significant differences were found among them.

In effect, from the point of view of how the channel is used, a typology can be established among the religiously-focused Catholic youtubers studied. This taxonomy is derived from the observation of how each influencer uses the platform and how they implement the specific features of YouTube, which make the platform more than a simple channel for broadcasting audio-visual content in the style of traditional television, including relationships and interaction with audiences, new ways of generating engagement, the influence of other youtubers in producing content, and more.

According to these criteria, the following typology can be established:

a. 100% youtubers. The quintessential example is SmDani. This Spanish priest uses the medium with a level of fluidity that is unmatched by any of the other cases

studied. His video formats are highly dynamic. Moreover, he stands out because the topics chosen come from the channel itself, such as a response to youtuber Dama G and her attacks on the figure of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church through a sarcastic video. Others include his reaction to a rap song about Hell and Satan by youtuber Canserbero, which preceded his own suicide, as well as an interview with youtuber Auronplay and more. Daniel Pajuelo uses many resources to interact with subscribers. He also considers proposals for new content and encourages it through the channel as well, fulfilling all the standards of a youtuber who gives something back to his community of followers, thereby acting in the same way as other youtubers with no connection to religious discourse. Clearly, SmDani is the only one of the group whose channel would not be possible without the existence of social networks, while others would have a place in traditional media such as television, including local, cable, large networks, etc.

b. Television-style youtubers. This category includes broadcasters who use the channel as a simple means of audio-visual transmission, and who make little use of the potential of social networks. Comments can be made, but they are mostly approving, with no purpose other than to show support, similar to the letters from viewers to television programmes in the old days. This category includes Gabriel Quintero, Father Fortea, Sister Glenda, Father Ángel Espinosa de los Monteros, and Luis Toro. Regarding the latter, even though he has a live chat, it is not related to the broadcast and its content is identical to that of the comments on other channels, which are limited to personal praise, sending encouragement and thanks, and expressing personal feelings. This type of youtuber is simply a classic TV preacher or televangelist who has moved to the Web. The term televangelist was coined in 1981 by Hadden and Swann in their book *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (Hadden and Swann 1981). Its origins can be traced to a pioneering project in religious communication launched in 1958 by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to create programmes with a Christian message to be broadcast on local television stations (Ellens 1974). In these programmes, people who did not attend religious services were invited to participate and speak, with the aim of winning converts for the Baptist church. Over time, this communicative approach spread massively throughout the United States, with a strong impact in terms of audience, revenue, and even press coverage due to a series of scandals and the resulting governmental investigations (Bekkering 2011). The emergence of the Internet and its rapid expansion in the last decades of the 20th century led classic TV preachers to broadcast their programmes on the web. In fact, many of them have shifted their main activity to the Internet due to strong growth in the viewing of their videos online (Marshall 2009). On the other hand, the broadcast of content on the Internet provides new opportunities for interaction with the audience in the form of comments, live chats, and broadcasts through links inserted in other social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and others. Thus, televangelists display their content while internet evangelists use 'a type of communication aimed at interpersonal intermediation' (Marshall 2009, 46).

c. Mixed youtubers. This category includes communicators such as Father Adolfo and Rafael Díaz. Their topics are typical of traditional preaching or liturgical acts, yet they try to make a connection with members of the channel, either by referring to comments during the broadcast or encouraging audiences to participate. Moreover, in some cases they promote their own products for sale online, and although this practice already has a history in teleshopping and advertised telephone sales, it takes on a new dimension on the Internet through websites. The shift to the Internet is driven by the low production costs demanded by channels such as YouTube, and even by the opportunity to monetise content by earning revenue from the simple act of posting, which has led to exponential growth in the number of content broadcasters (Simpson and Greenfield 2009). On the other hand, the new 'Inter-preachers', or 'Inter-evangelists', take advantage of the accessibility of their content on YouTube to reach international audiences far beyond their immediate parishioners, following the model set forth by Percy (2006), who predicted that the future of TV preachers was headed toward internet channels, so they could make the most of the unique opportunities offered to traditional televangelists by these media.

4.3. New parishioners

The third working hypothesis is aimed at analysing the influence on new audiences in terms of the impact made by the channel itself. Thus, the hypothesis was defined in positive terms, assuming that the activity developed by Catholic youtubers was expanded through YouTube, especially in the case of those who carry out communicative and pastoral activity inherent to their own religious roles, such as priests and other religious adherents. This third hypothesis was posed in both quantitative and qualitative terms: Being active on YouTube generates a larger number of 'parishioners', yet they are different, insofar as the channel allows access to new audiences and environments. However, no conclusive results have been obtained from the present study. Clearly, the number of parishioners is growing, yet in order to affirm that this growth is linked to the diversity of the main followers, it would be necessary to carry out a much more in-depth content analysis of comments collected on the platform. The present study has identified cases of non-believers, or people with little interest in the faith, whose comments reveal a recovery of religious practice, or who listen with pleasure to discussions about a topic thanks to these forums. In short, simple observation of the number of followers of each channel and the number of video views proves that the scope of the message is being multiplied when compared with traditional preaching. Thus, it can be affirmed that digital or virtual congregations are being created in the cultural and social spheres, which are receptive to the message. However, to determine the extent to which these channels are a focal point for attracting and/or converting non-believers, an analysis that is more far-reaching than the one undertaken in this study is required.

4.4. Social media preaching vs. classic preaching

With regard to the fourth and final working hypothesis, we have already observed that religious communication on social networks has features that are different from traditional in-person preaching by Catholic clergy offline. This can be seen in the way argumentation is carried out, in which inspirational, charismatic, and experiential oratory takes precedence over argumentative discourse based on Sacred Scripture and the authoritative texts of traditional preaching. Nevertheless, there are also differences in terms of the youtubers' communional link with the Church, especially regarding the difficulty in validating the self-proclaimed status of each channel or youtuber as 'Catholic' in this environment, as well as the orthodoxy of the messages. Finally, the dynamics of the communicative activity itself have features that are different from classic off-line preaching, which is unidirectional, whereas in communication through YouTube there is dialogue that generates new content, as seen in the archetypical influencer we have described as a 100% youtuber, Spanish priest Daniel Pajuelo (SmDani). However, such a conclusion would focus exclusively on external aspects of communication, overlooking the spiritual dimension of the homily. The homily is the quintessential preaching genre, which is an 'essential communicative event' that refers to a communicative dynamic that is supernatural (Piccolo and Steeves 2019).

Regarding the type of relationship established between the youtubers and their followers, no conclusions can be drawn from this study regarding the type of leadership that arises through social networks regarding the religious influencers analysed. If the diverse types of leadership are characterised less by the position of influence of the communicators in motivating the audience, the interest that guides them, and the objective they seek in this relationship (Cardona 2000), the research herein reveals the existence of vocational inspiration, or extrinsic motivation in the youtubers analysed. Nevertheless, until an analysis is carried out regarding the motivations of the followers, it will not be possible to determine the extent to which the cases analysed reflect what has been referred to as transcendental leadership (Pérez-López 1991).

Note

1. https://stspeterandpaulbasilica.com/news/bishop-stika-issues-decree-regarding-three-speakers-april-8-2022.

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