SHARED BIBLICAL VALUES IN ONLINE FAITH COMMUNITIES IN PANDEMIC CONDITIONS

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ABSTRACT: Shared Biblical Values in Online Faith Communities in Pandemic Conditions.
This study explores the ways in which a number of Christian believers have shared core Christian values in faith communities via the Internet, under pandemic conditions and in the context of an increasing tendency towards an individualistic society. What inspires them to seek biblical values seems to be the very natural need for fellowship and the multiple examples given both in the Old and the New Testaments. Although religious authority is undergoing transformation due to the impact of the Internet on religious communities, lay people generally cooperate in order to advance and translate biblical values in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: *values, faith community, the Trinity, the Internet, religious authority.*

Technological changes significantly mark the course of several Romanian Christian communities; therefore, technologies seem to influence in a visible way also the members of the local churches.

In the context of the impact of culture and media on Christian values, this essay explores current issues regarding individual and communitarian values as expressed online within several faith communities. Moreover, it explores two metaphors associated with the concepts of community in the Old Testament and of church and fellowship in the New Testament. At the same time, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is addressed as a revelation necessary for the human understanding of individual religious experience and life in a community of faith.

Starting from the contribution brought by the practice of the New Testament Church, this study explores aspects of the experience with the

digital phenomenon of some Christian communities during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic[1].

I. Current Aspects in Society and in Digital Spaces

Anxiety and anguish become aspects with which we live every day in society, because the perception of insecurity is growing and existential fragility is rampant. Not only for the apparently closest threats, such as global economic, health and military threats (2008 financial crisis, 2020 pandemic, 2022 war), but above all for those considered distant and yet much more problematic, such as climate change or escalation of military conflicts, with their shockwaves in terms of impact on society and even civilization. Their extensions comprise both the physical realm and the digital space. In the 21st century, new information and communication technologies have brought about changes that affect almost all aspects of social life, including religion[2]. Information technologies such as the Internet have produced revolutionary transformations not only in the way people communicate, but also in the way they interpret society and life.

In spite of the modern man's confidence in the power of reason starting with the era of Enlightenment, individuals also understood to some extent the power of determining factors, and the impact on them of the main forms of enculturation. Today people attempt, to varying degrees, to overcome irrational prejudices and the influence of early conditioning, but they remain, to a great degree, beings of particular times, places, and circumstances. They are brought up as children and young adults to hold particular religious (or para-religious) beliefs, attitudes, and values, and to reject others; and in much of their mature years, they make personal efforts to come to terms rationally with their earliest religious education.

In different media contexts, particularly the internet, there are seemingly ongoing attacks on traditional values by a number of liberals, feminists, secular humanists, and others that seem to accumulate in order "to subvert the Judeo-Christian moral and cultural foundations of the Western democracies. A recurrent theme in conservative religious cultural

1 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis". *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man*, 2020, vol.6, no.2, pp. 71-82.

2 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Om-Demnitate-Libertate (Man-Dignity-Freedom)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Risoprint, 2019), pp. 214-215.

criticism is that even in a pluralistic democracy, Biblical moral teaching, particularly with respect to Christian communities, is a bulwark against cultural anarchy"[3].

Given the importance of religion, the family, and culture in just about every society, one may safely assume that practical and intellectual benefits can be derived from philosophical reflection on the cultural relations of the family and religion[4].

1. Shifts in Core Values from One Generation to Another

In his research on the cultural evolution of advanced societies, Ronald Inglehart (1990, 2018) notes a fundamental passage that occurs between the generations belonging to the era of the world wars and those of the second post-war period. It is a change in values and ideas linked to the constant increase in the chances of survival and existential security. Liberation from material necessities (and a certain increase in general "happiness") characterizes for Inglehart the distinction between materialistic generations (pre-war) and post-materialistic generations (after-war). The change in values and beliefs from one to another is attributable in particular to three directions: from collectivism to individualism, from survival to self-expression, from embeddedness to autonomy.[5]

What is occurring in the West is nothing less than the collapse of the Judeo-Christian worldview, a crisis of confidence in modernity, and the emergence of a new but undeveloped worldview that might be called "postmodern individualism". The "traditional" world from the not far away past, and the "individualistic" world that is emerging. The traditional world represents the cultural worldview that developed in the West over centuries and that is drawn from Greek and Roman civilizations and Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The "individualistic" world represents a contemporary worldview that is rapidly replacing the "traditional" world throughout

3 Jay Newman, *Biblical Religion and Family Values: A Problem in the Philosophy of Culture* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), p. 1.

4 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Aspects of Biblical Philosophy on the Development of World Civilizations". *Scientia Moralitas. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8 (2023), no.1, pp. 62-79.

5 Matteo Pietropaoli, *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 4-5.

Europe, the United States, and urban centers worldwide[6].

2. *Values as Intrinsic Concept and as Applied in Social Contexts*

Freedom is a fundamental value of societies with relative degrees of individualism. Indeed, the social theme of individualism dominates the reflection of Alain Ehrenberg (1998). He tries to show the passage from a modernity shaped by conflict, and by the social, existential and psychological dynamics linked to it, to one "shaped by freedom, in the sense of both psychic liberation and individual initiative and responsibility. He characterizes today's individual as a *democratized sovereign individual*, with all the modulations, dynamics and pathologies that concern him and that affect current society"[7].

In what sense is freedom or any other abstract term of construct defined as a value? The term *values* has itself fallen into some disfavor with scholars worried about its appropriation by pop culture, psychotherapists, televangelists, politicians, and journalists. Nonetheless, axiology properly remains a major field within philosophy, and though the philosophical study of value and valuation has a long history, much of the most important work in the field has been done in the last two centuries. In ordinary language the term *values* is sometimes used mainly in a descriptive way and sometimes in a more evaluative way. When someone is seeking a companion with "good values" or "high moral values," she is implying what is often acknowledged explicitly, that there are also individuals with "questionable values" who assign "too much value" to such things as material possessions, fame, and ephemeral pleasures. From this perspective, values in themselves are neither good nor bad, right nor wrong, high nor low. People's values, understood simply in terms of how much positive importance those people assign—relatively—to the things that are of fundamental concern to them, can themselves be appraised by a critical observer according to the observer's criteria, and these criteria may include the observer's own values (as well as more impersonal criteria, such as clarity and consistency).

However, values can be seen as being intrinsically of value. When someone says, for example, "He is a corrupt person without any values," or,

6 Dale S. Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism* (Baker Publishing, 2009), p. 32.

7 Pietropaoli, *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems*, p. 10.

"I respect someone who is more concerned with values than with money and power," the speaker might grant that there is a sense in which a corrupt person has bad values such as excessive fascination with power. Yet there may also be a sense in which values as such are essentially valuable; that is the sense in which it is better to have values, on the basis of having reflected on what matters and should matter in one's own life and the lives of others, than to go through life behaving unreflectively, mechanically, thoughtlessly, impulsively, and so on. Although prepared to grant that a reflective person can end up with negative values, one "may still believe that appreciating the moral and existential import of committing oneself to values and acting on the basis of those values is directly related to conceiving oneself as a free and responsible agent"[8].

When trying to define an individual's values or the value of an object or ideal, it is apparently easier to do so. However, when one tries to define the values of a whole communities, the task becomes rather difficult to grasp, since a community's values have greater dynamics and are rather of an ambivalent nature when thinking about expressed perspectives and conducted actions. It may help to consider an analogy with particular classes of cultural phenomena that are valued. Society in general acknowledges that corruption can enter into general forms of culture such as religion, technology, art, and politics. Religion, technology, art, politics, and the like can all be sources of harm, but conceived as general forms of culture, they are essentially "of value." Extending this analogy, one may note that while some see Church life as often a source of distinctive harm, most allow that the institution of the Church, conceived as a form of culture, is essentially of value in representing a fundamental effort to meliorate human existence. However, the value of the Church per se, thinking of it on a global scale and at the same time as a historical ideal, must be distinguished from the value of particular forms of family and the value of particular families; and moreover, the relative value of the family must be determined by considering it, both generally and in specific contexts, in relation to other cultural phenomena, to the concerns and aspirations of individuals, and so forth. With respect to religion, respected anthropologists such as Annemarie de Waal Malefijt report that "religious values are found in every known hu-

8 Newman, *Biblical Religion and Family Values: A Problem in the Philosophy of Culture*, p. 23.

man society and significantly interacts with other cultural institutions, including systems of family organization and marriage"[9]. Talking about such values as justice, wisdom, courage, self-control, faith, hope, and love is more specific and more focused, but when related directly to concerns about how to produce and sustain faith communities, it seems vaguer and less helpful than when applying these values in practical communitarian life.

A great number of people in Western democracies who enter into debates over faith communities seem to know to a lesser degree about universal values, though for rhetorical purposes they may pretend otherwise. The religious values that concern them are essentially those they see as having practical relevance to a culture in which they actively participate[10]. And this is understandable since people are more interested in the immediate usefulness of material culture. However, this could rather be seen as a materialistic approach to values than as a cautious and principled way to deal with millenary values that have shaped societal culture and made it what it is today.

Mass society itself, following enormous conflicts and tragedies in the name of new ideals, evolves into an abandonment of general narratives in favor of individual perspectivism. Here the human being of Western civilization is no longer willing to "die for ideas", or to kill for them, but above all he is not willing to become that no one who joins the crowd in its common motions[11].

Society becomes increasingly post-ideological, consisting of a multitude of individuals, personalities and worldviews, who manage to gather on some shared conceptions and battles, but not as a community or a crowd, rather as a multitude of individuals with weak shared interests or no declared common interest at all. Both in civil life and on the internet, "it does not constitute a stable and common "us", but a temporary group of "egos" with similar or converging personal goals and interests"[12].

3. Impact of Technological Change on Faith Communities

9 Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 1.

10 Newman, *Biblical Religion and Family Values*, p. 4.

11 Pietropaoli, *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems*, p. 13.

12 Pietropaoli, *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems*, pp. 14-15.

Several questions regarding the digital phenomenon are being discussed: What are people looking for when they visit web pages about religion or when they seek virtual spiritual experiences? What impact could these practices have on one's own religious values and experience? What exactly does the church consist of when physical gatherings are no longer possible? How do churches maintain a sense of community in virtual space in a time of social distancing? Will the virtual church affect membership values? Would the faithful be ready for a digital church? How much would they be willing to tolerate or embrace digital forms of worship as an alternative to a community identified geographically? What could a shift from face-to-face religious services to online services mean for a faith community's values?

Questions as such can open the discussion about what has been and what could be in the future the role of the Church in times of social crisis. Within the Romanian culture, a number of faith communities seem to be too focused on visible things such as worship gatherings and other similar practices than on the effective support of a network of intra-community relations and finding creative solutions to social-religious problems faced by believers. If the churches would focus on establishing and maintaining relationships with their peers, through the lens of the New Testament Gospel, then the role of communities could probably increase in society. When a church is oriented towards serving the generally recognized needs and at the social level and towards answering the deep expectations and desires of individuals, then it could draw closer to fulfilling Christ's mandate to live and share His teaching in and with the world (cf. Matthew 28:19-20).

II. Biblical Values and Contemporary Religious Experience

It is often easier to see the church as the physical place where believers gather for worship rather than the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. However, the spiritual dimension of religious experience must be kept in mind. When He said that "God is Spirit; and whoever worships Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), Christ did not exclude the place dedicated to worship, since the discussion at Jacob's well resumed a controversy of soteriological nature. Indeed, God is Spirit, but worshipers are beings made of flesh and blood, beings who operate by their senses. Thus, localized worship in a consecrated public setting cannot be exclud-

ed, since Christ Himself regularly participated in the worship rituals at the temple and in the synagogue. Thus, Christ valued both an individual's encounter with the divine and him meeting the divine along with others in spaces dedicated to worship.

1. The New Testament Church as Physical Place for Worship and Digital Space

The physical place of assembly was quite important in the context of worship. This was in accordance with the Mosaic law regarding public worship. God had commanded the Israelites to assemble a tabernacle exclusively for worship, an intermediate meeting space with the worshippers. Since the pattern of the tent of meeting and that of the temple in Jerusalem were detailed, this seems to suggest that the place of worship matters.[13] Thus, actual elements such as place, cultic symbols, and immediate rituals provided specific information and guidance on how to worship the Lord.

The temple was the place of worship where God announced His presence and where people came to meet Him. Over time, the temple accumulated spiritual, social, economic and cultural functions that made the life's focus of the Israelite tribes and the royal house.[14] Following the return from the Babylonian exile, Jewish scholars supplemented the worship by building synagogues throughout the historical Israelite territory as well as in the diaspora. In the Christian era, imposing edifices were built to meet the worshipers' need to meet God. But for worshipers, the problems posed by the unintelligible cult services and the relative lack of communitarian spirit within holy places, and even the time periods set for worship,

13 A good argument is made by John Inge, Anglican bishop, in his book: *A Christian Theology of Place* (Taylor & Francis, 2018), pp.11-22.

14 Similarly, social networks have the potential to facilitate the creation of an electronic tent, a tabernacle, a public square and a central meeting place (electronic tent, tabernacle, piazza and city square, the terms used by Prof. Heidi Campbell) where all commercial or informational exchanges take place, as well as all kinds of social activities. Therefore, it could only be a matter of time before people meeting online for commerce, education, entertainment and the like would see virtual worlds as electronic temples and natural meeting places for worship. And if cyberspace is the new public square or agora, then the online church brings the gospel to where the people are. This fact creates the opportunity to reach more people. Knowing that technology is not entirely neutral, then it is challenging how God can be at the center of worship. The resistance of some to adopting new technologies in worship can be understood from the perspective that technology has the potential to become an object of worship rather than a means of drawing closer to God.

remained unsolved or were simply ignored due to ecclesial policies. The churches could not contact or touch the lives of a significant number of individuals in society.

Instead, in the digital age, things can take an interesting turn and favor the awareness of the sacred on different coordinates of space and time. Space can be perceived differently due to the quasi-instant access to online meetings of religious nature. For worshippers, such spaces can prove a welcome complement or supplement to in-person meetings. However, the new reality of virtual possibilities is not perceived or treated in similar ways by believers. The question is how do worshipers conceive of this place. Is the distance from Church premises a threat to true worship or, on the contrary, an opportunity for what constitutes the Temple of God, namely the life of the worshiper who fully understands His presence? It seems beyond doubt that spiritual space and distance, if such things exist, are different from physical or social space and distance.[15] But in what ways? The two categories differ in the degree of trust they can enjoy, they differ in the costs involved and in the authority figures that regulate them. They differ in both frequency and content.

According to the New Testament, the church represents "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9). In the apostolic age, this was also true when the church was or had a physical place where worshipers could assemble.[16] Instead, God chose to dwell among His people. God had announced that His will was to be among them, through the place of worship, but also to dwell secretly, in a spiritual sense, in them, through the Holy Spirit. Each of them was to be an individual temple, but this did not exclude the possibility and, why not, the opportunity to be simultaneously a Temple as a church. Wor-

15 See the discussion in Heidi A. Campbell's *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), p. 56.

16 According to some with progressive views on the religious phenomenon, the deity would have chosen to communicate individually with worshipers without the need for organized religion. Up to a certain point, this possibility could be considered. It cannot be ruled out that God could have chosen to keep in touch with all of them individually. If the biblical plan did not presuppose the existence of the church, but the relationship of the individual with the divine were sufficient, then each believer could have had an exclusive connection with the divinity, without ever taking part in the life of a religious community. This argument could be used to express individualistic patterns and preferences but it needs further documentation and articulation.

ship was expected to be both individual and collective.

In the apostles' church, all "were together in one place" (Acts 2:1) because corporate worship was not only possible, but also important and desirable to worshippers. Similarly, the writer of Hebrews advises believers not to forsake meeting together for worship "as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" to come together (Hebrews 10:25). This was the essential way in which community life or in New Testament Greek, *koinonia*, spiritual fellowship with God and with other Christians in the same local community, could be ensured and sustained.

2. *The Church under Physical Restrictions and Transforming Fellowship*

During the pandemic, the churches had no choice but to transpose the weekly services, often radically truncated, onto online platforms. In addition, all physical gatherings, including small group meetings, were effectively banned, and many churches temporarily stopped practicing ceremonial baptism or the Lord's Supper in the place of worship. Media possibilities for the maintenance of spiritual life constituted a welcome supplement to community life, but it was not intended to be a surrogate for it. In few words, local communities expressed hope or even certainty that the situation would return to the pre-pandemic state. However, no one knew how long this state of affairs would last. But the question came back and was articulated as the state of emergency, and later the state of alert, was prolonged. Church life had been disrupted, with no way of knowing when it would return to normal. No one could know how long the "exile" away from the physical space of worship would last.

Under these conditions, some Christians "expressed doubt whether attending religious services online could still be regarded as authentic worship"[17]. Others expressed concerns that the digitization of the church could result in the erosion of communion or fellowship (*koinonia*) among members.[18] However, this might not be the case. While Bible Zoom meet-

17 Banks, A. M. (2020), Shunning online services, some clergy preach "abstinence" from gathered worship. *Religion News Service*. Article available at URL: https://religionnews.com/2020/04/09/shunning-online-services-some-clergy-preach-abstinence-from-gathered-worship/.

18 Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation* (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 21. Edition available electronically at URL: https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/188698.

ings, for instance, may not be as engaging as physical gatherings, several scholars have argued that "virtual meetings do not necessarily result in a total loss of fellowship within the community"[19]. Although the churches made temporary arrangements, this fact didn't stop them from being the Body of Christ. The New Testament contains a number of analogies to refer to the church, but the most deeply Christological analogy of all seems to be that of the Body of Christ (cf. Ephesians 5, Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12). Since Christians are members of the Body, their relationship with one another is always mediated by their Lord, who is the Head of the Body (Colossians 1:18). According to the New Testament text, God has organized the church in such a way that its members are deeply dependent on one another. They are to encourage each other (1 Thessalonians 5:11), pray for one another (Ephesians 6:18), bear the burdens of their brothers and sisters in the Lord (Galatians 6:2), and speak to one another words of encouragement according to those inner promptings perceived as coming from God.[20]

This seems obvious in early Christianity when written communication was added to the initially oral communication, essential for further verification of Christian teachings.[21] Even the apostle Paul used the communication means of his time because he was an avid writer of epistles. He wrote so much to exhort, instruct, rebuke, and encourage the churches in various ancient cities, both in liberty and while in prison[22]. The apostle

19 Heidi A. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 176-177.

20 "The Christian needs another Christian to tell him the Word of God," Bonhoeffer wrote. "He needs his brother as the bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation" (Bonhoeffer, in the 1954 book, 23). As Christian fellowship is accomplished by Christ, so it is sustained by Him. By becoming one in Christ, Bonhoeffer argues, Christians "can continue to do so only through Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through Him are we bound together" (Bonhoeffer, 1954, 24). This is certainly true even when Christians are kept apart by the restrictions imposed (referring to the pandemic) and can only "meet" virtually through technology.

21 Heidi A. Campbell and J. Dyer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church: Theological Reflections on a New Normal* (SCM Press, 2022), p. 7. Compared to that era, face-to-face communication has been supplemented and temporarily replaced by digital communication due to the recent global contagion.

22 This could be used and seen as an analogy to the long physical restrictions on freedom imposed by national authorities, under pandemic conditions.

knew that distance and separation could not threaten that deep *koinonia* he had with these churches and that his letters could and would, by the grace of God, have an impact on their recipients.

Like the apostle Paul, Christians should long to see each other in the flesh (Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:4). This is because God, in creating fleshly beings, made the physical presence and interaction of the members an important aspect of faith community. Professor Kristin Johnston Largen emphasizes the need for materiality as a basis for spiritual worship: "Our bodies matter to God: we carry the *imago Dei* both in our bodies and in our gatherings as the body of Christ. Everything about the Christian faith is embodied – we know God in the body, we share Christ with each other in the body, we are united with God and God's family in the body, and it must be emphasized that even the Eucharist is also based on material elements"[23].

Bonhoeffer repeatedly emphasized this point: *koinonia* is possible and assured only in Christ. He writes that: "The more authentic and deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will lose importance; and Jesus Christ and His work will become more and more clearly the only thing that is vital among us"[24]. Therefore, the church, understood from a Christological point of view, should not be seen as human invention or confused with "some illusory idea of religious fellowship". The Church is not a "psychic reality" but a "divine reality" whose essence is deeply "spiritual"[25].

It is worth noting that online religious services, digital Bible study or other types of technology-mediated interactions can facilitate a deepening

23 Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology* (Springer International Publishing, 2023), p. 46. In a similar line of argument, Bonhoeffer argued that spiritual life and physical existence are not only interdependent functional, but it was considered a necessity even for Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. Man was created as a body, the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, resurrected in the body, in the Eucharistic service the believer partakes of the symbols of the body of Christ, "and the resurrection of the dead will accomplish the perfect fellowship of the spiritual-physical creatures of God . The believer therefore praises the Creator, the Redeemer, God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of his brother" (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 19-20).

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer and S. Wells, *Life Together* (SCM Press, 2015), original 1954 edition, p. 26.

25 Bonhoeffer and Wells, p. 26.

relationship with Jesus Christ and involve not physical but spatial proximity between Him and His followers. Digital technology can supplement or facilitate this spatial or spiritual intimacy with Christ both individually and together with the ecclesial community. Campbell agrees that, "without a doubt, this is best done in person, face to face. But this can also be done through communication technologies such as WhatsApp, e-mail, Facebook or Zoom"[26].

The alleged inability to participate in worship can in some cases be seen as a pseudo-problem because worship can also be present in activities outside the worship building. Church history professor Horton Davies surprisingly defined worship as simply "the joyful response of Christians to the holy, redeeming love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ"[27].

Unmediated interpersonal communication is necessary because it provides the opportunity for a full exchange of information between parties. Bearing this in mind, the life of the individual within a faith community seems significantly marked by Christian ritual and symbols. Using a geological image, theologian Alistair McFadyen speaks of the person sedimented by the flow of communication between subjects: in other words, the subject develops a "structured identity, a continuous sedimentation composed of significant moments"[28] of acts of communication and interaction with other people and with God. Thus, a believer's identity is substantially shaped and enriched by the impact over time of relationships with other Christians. This argument becomes even stronger when viewed from a biblically Trinitarian perspective.

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26 Spiritual reality is like a fabric or polyphony. Christians participate in this reality whether they are in a cathedral or in the living room of their homes. The body of ministers of the Word makes God "hearable" even when worship services are broadcast live or recorded. Despite this argument, obviously useful during the recent pandemic, the position of many believers remains favorable to bodily worship, once the pandemic as a global health emergency was declared ended in May 2023 by the World Health Organization. Although young and adult Christians are generally quite skillful at using digital media to keep in touch with others, many feel that this means of communication cannot replace actual physical interactions. For further thoughts on the issue, see the discussion in Campbell's book, *Digital Ecclesiology*, pp. 23-25.

27 Horton Davies, *Christian Worship: Its History and Meaning* (Read Books, 2007), original 1957 edition, p. 105.

28 Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 7-8.

3. The Trinity as Model for Christian Fellowship

The dynamics within the Trinity as depicted in the Bible point to the source of the natural human need for interpersonal interaction and communication. The Incarnation is the fundamental principle on which the whole edifice of the Christian faith rests: Jesus Christ took on the physical limitations of the human condition and shared the experiences of the various ages of human life. In this way, Christ interacted with people to help them in their process of spiritual understanding and transformation regarding sin and salvation.

While many Christians in the 21st century may take this fact for granted, it was a very radical and counter-intuitive idea in the ancient world. The annals of the early church history reveal intense debates among those Christians who were steeped in Hellenistic philosophy.

The biblical revelation about the nature of the Godhead contrasts with Hellenistic thought. First, according to the ancient Greeks, the world of the gods paralleled life on earth, and their interactions with human life were aimed at maintaining a predetermined cosmic order, their interventions rarely being out of a sense of compassion for the human condition. The Greek pantheon illustrated several major tenets of what is today coined individualistic behavior. Individualism as a worldview can be traced back to Aristotle works on man and ethics[29].

Biblical Trinity reveals sustained involvement in human history. Throughout the ages, the Creator has revealed Himself personally and often relationally as God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The many ways in which the Trinity directed salvation history (Hebrews 1:1) show the divine condescension towards human condition. The divine grace given to mankind since the Fall had a full manifestation in the incarnate revelation of the Word of God (John 1:14). Incarnation was necessary so that God could fully communicate His will not only through words but also through the sharing of the human condition in the flesh. Given this fact, the embodied existence of believers is essential for communion with the divine and the full experience of sanctifying grace (John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

29 For an introduction on the ancient philosopher's perspective on human ethics, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics: Complete Edition*, trans. D.P. Chase (Good Press, 2023), Introduction.

4. Religious Experience as Source for Theology

Within this discussion, the religious experience of the faith community in general and that of individual believers in particular could be used as a source for theological knowledge. A few major sources in theology are generally recognized. For example, Protestant theology historically appealed to four sources: "Scripture (biblical exegesis), reason (the discoveries of science and human reasoning), experience (individual and ecclesial encounters with life), and tradition (the teachings of the church)"[30]. Of the four potential sources, religious experience is the one that has particular relevance in the study of the ways in which digital technology influences believers. Therefore, the experience of encountering God and the conceptual framework that describes this experience can be shaped "by the religious community, which is the church, through its sacred symbols, narratives and documents"[31].

The study of faith as it is interpreted and applied by the church in general and believers in particular becomes more interesting in the context of digital technologies and the immersion of young adults in the digital phenomenon. This fact is also facilitated by the multiple examples of technology use, occasioned by the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

III. Online Church Values in the Recent Pandemic Context

The pandemic caused numerous disruptions to the church's life. Church history has definitely known other periods of social tumult. Throughout the two millennia, it has encountered turmoil and social movements caused by epidemics, persecution, wars, migration, but each time it has resisted undefeated, despite the costs involved. Although the world has been affected by pandemics before, like the great flu epidemic of 1918, and churches have responded accordingly, the possibilities afforded by alternative forms of interaction make the recent pandemic unique. Churches adapted quickly. Some were ready to switch to or incorporate different technological means to expand worship. In some communities, the time from deciding

30 Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998), pp. 170-181.

31 Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 64.

to suspend in-person worship and developing live streaming plans to video conferencing, outdoor gatherings, and identifying alternative forms of worship was reduced to several days.

For Christians in different parts of the world, God promises to be with them (cf. Psalms 37:25; Matthew 28:20; John 14:16), regardless of whether their worship services are held publicly or clandestinely, because of persecution, regardless of whether they take place in imposing buildings or in makeshift shelters in refugee camps. Campbell argues that "their identity as God's people and the spiritual reality of their fellowship with God and with one another do not depend on circumstances, but on their faith in Christ and the power of the Spirit who made them members of the Body of Christ"[32].

Through the Internet, information about God is available to the majority of the world's population. And if the knowledge of God is everywhere, this could mean that the church can maintain a continuous awareness of His presence on all occasions and in all places. This could also mean that all things, places and occasions could be seen as sacred. And one of the challenges to the role of Christianity in contemporary culture remains the emphasis on the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. Ideally, the online church has the ability to bridge this gap when it is recognized that members are always in the presence of God and that God is always with them (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). Experiencing the promise of God's presence (through reading, personal testimony, or the preached word, even by means of religious content accessed on digital devices) offers the possibility of being aware of God's abundant grace in their daily lives. In reality, urban lay members are in diverse cultural environments that favor more or less vertical dialogue with God; although lay members recognize and confess "God's promise to never forsake them, this fact is more of a cognitive acknowledgment than actual lived awareness"[33]. Despite the online availability of sacred resources and of community encounters, these are seemingly being accessed by a comparatively small number of Internet users.

1. The Pandemic in a Romanian Context

The coronavirus pandemic that started in Romania in March 2020 gave

32 Campbell, *Digital Ecclesiology*, 22.

33 Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, 57.

rise to an unprecedented social phenomenon for the population: social distancing as prevention method. From a technological perspective, those first months of the pandemic were a turning point in the experience of many faith communities. Reflecting on that period, it can be said that technology came to the fore as an immediate solution for continuing weekly religious meetings and maintaining contact between community members.

On the first Saturday after the declaration of the state of emergency, some of the members of the church in Târgoviște acutely experienced a feeling of unease, of inadequacy to the factual situation[34]. Some became aware for the first time of the online activity of various Romanian-speaking groups and, out of curiosity or at the suggestion of friends, they discovered a multitude of video materials with religious content that they had not been aware of before. Soon, the availability of so many recordings and live broadcasts in Romanian or different world languages determined in many an almost overwhelming feeling of freedom to navigate through a diversity of religious messages. Some testified to the previously unknown accessibility of an unimaginable variety of sermons that they could watch at any time of the day. They could enter different online platforms until they settled on those contents that seemed more interesting and engaging.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the following behavior of members of some local communities could be observed: some confessed that they liked the idea of being able to listen to as many sermons as possible and to be able to enter from one church to another, to move from one platform to another to find out which online service is more interesting and attractive. A general question loomed in the minds of some local Adventist leaders: how could the multiple forms of media be integrated into the life of most churches from now on?

Several communities in Bucharest tried to answer this question.[35] These communities handled media platforms as tools that can be used to replicate online what was previously done offline. Nevertheless, this can be a misleading perspective on media in general and media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or X (formerly Twitter) in particular. Not

34 In March 2020, I was serving as pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist community in Târgoviște city, Dâmbovița County.

35 As doctoral student, I researched the Millennial age group of Adventist local churches in Bucharest between 2020-2023.

many seemed to reflect on the ways in which the religious content transmitted undergoes changes and has a different impact than the service held within the physical place of worship.

2. Networked Individualism's Impact on the Church

The interactive nature of online platforms implies that the religious content can be perceived differently. Religious or spiritual services can be packaged and consumed in various ways depending on the age group or interest of the audience. Online platforms are centered on the individual, and the communities created differ from offline communities where individuals' options are limited by space and time. The move to online could strengthen dispersed or fragmented and partly individualistic forms of communities, which could have an impact on offline communities that are regulated by factors such as participation on the condition of physical presence. Communities built through social media platforms create and reinforce "networked individualism, which is associated with freedom of choice and increased mobility"[36].

However, this flexibility of practice and tendency towards individualism online is not limited to online religious practice. Researchers within other areas of Internet Studies have found the Internet encourages involvement in contexts that allow the production of multiple identities simultaneously. This finding highlights that Internet use may encourage a hyper-autonomy. Scholars have noted that online practice may reinforce what is described as "networked individualism", a movement towards personalized networks facilitated by the social structures of networked society. The result of this move from place-to-place to person-to-person connectivity means individuals can switch more easily between different social contexts and activities, and so have more control over the sources of knowledge they will draw on and the connections they will make. In a comparative analysis, Barry Wellman emphasizes the ways in which individualism within online networks differs from traditional groups within society. He contends that "In networked societies, boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections shift between multiple networks, and hi-

36 Heidi A. Campbell, "Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2017, the study covers pp. 680-694), 683.

erarchies tend to be flatter and more recursive"[37]. Below is the comparative analysis of groups and networks:

Group-Centered Society	Networked Individualism
Contact within and between groups	Contact between individuals
Group contact	One-to-one contact
Neighborhood community	Multiple communities
Local ties	Local and distant ties
Bowling leagues	Shifting networks of friends who bowl
Homogeneous ties	Diversified ties
Somewhat involuntary kin and neighbor ties	Voluntary friendship ties
Strong social control	Weak social control/shift to another network
Broad spectrum of social capital within group	Diversified search for specialized social capital
Tight boundaries with other groups	Permeable boundaries with other networks
Organized recreational groups	Shifting networks of recreational friends
Public spaces	Private spaces and online
Bulletin boards	Facebook, Twitter
Focused work unit	Networked organization
Autarky	Globalization, outsourcing

Source: Barry Wellman. © 2011, used with permission.

Concern has been raised by some about networked individualism's implications for offline socialization and community practices (Campbell, 2004). Indeed, Armfield and Holbert[38] found "individual-level religiosity is negatively associated with Internet use", meaning that Internet users primarily interact at an individual rather than a community level, which might encourage a "secularism model" of engagement. Campbell argues that "In the case of religious Internet use, this tendency encourages highly individualized patterns of practice rather than linking to official institutions. Thus, the Internet offers a marketplace of possibilities guiding users towards personalized convergent practices, creating highly individualized patterns of life online"[39].

37 Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (MIT Press, 2014), p. 37.

38 Armfield GG and Holbert RL (2003) The relationship between religiosity and Internet use. *Journal of Media and Religion* 3(2): pp. 129–144.

39 Campbell, "Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends

3. Leadership's Task Towards Online Faith Communities

Based on discussions held with pastors and lay people, several faith communities in Bucharest nurtured the legitimate desire for a "return to normal", the way the church life was before the pandemic. There were many who believed that it would return to normal. Even pastors in Bucharest, while carrying out online ministry as an additional measure to meet the immediate need to support church life, were convinced that meetings in classic format would soon be permitted. At the time, that was not yet possible because nothing was exactly as before. There could no longer be a return to a *status quo ante* due to the adoption of digital behaviors that seemed to be unintentionally directed at the detriment of physical participation. And if the church's only plan was to return to "normal", then the use of digital technologies in worship would no longer have been fruitful. As it was becoming apparent to many, the return to normal was only an appearance. Physical attendance of church services in Bucharest had been in continuous decline for several decades due to the emigration of young adults and the aging of the remaining members. But there may be another reason, as Campbell comments: "Young believers are discovering new sources of spiritual nourishment and will be even more disillusioned with low-quality worship services and a theology lacking consistent content"[40].

Some of what the churches have achieved in the pandemic "will have to continue, as it influences people on the fringes of Christian communities"[41]. Leaders must reflect on what they have to do from now on. With the pandemic, the usefulness of digital platforms for the accessibility of worship services for practically anyone on the Internet has been proven. Online access to worship services offers great opportunities and a great need to not only broadcast services live during the pandemic, but to do so continuously in the future. This is due to the fact that many people do not have the opportunity to attend local services, perhaps for health reasons, lack of time, but also for geographical reasons. In this context, many

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and Implications," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2017, the study covers p. 680-694), here pp. 683-684.

40 Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, p. 30. The COVID-19 pandemic was not a good thing, but if the churches were and remain adaptable, God could very well work for the good of the church (cf. Romans 8:28). People could no longer go to church; the church was to be brought into the homes of lay people.

41 Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, p. 22.

local churches in Bucharest have made valuable concessions in a time of unprecedented solitude and isolation: churches have used the possibility of broadcasting worship services online, organizing Zoom meetings in small groups and virtual rooms for prayer.

In the post-pandemic situation, churches have returned to physical, in-person worship services, including to baptism and the Eucharist or Holy Communion. At the same time, many if not most of them have engaged in an ongoing form of digital worship. Christian leaders have begun to see their work and the practice of the Christian faith as involving both physical and digital spaces, both in-person and mediated communication. "It's important that Christian pastors and religious educators engage in hybrid work and learn hybrid faith living – faith work and living that takes place both in church buildings and online"[42]. Digital tools have obvious limitations and some forms of media use can certainly affect users' health, but it is essential that church leaders begin to seek God's guidance in discerning what it means to do pastoral work and live faithfully in a new participative media culture.

If until 2020 communication mediated by technological means was a choice based on local preference, at the beginning of the pandemic digital communication presented itself as the only possible option for communication and cultural participation. Truly, the pandemic highlighted or amplified social behaviors in relation to the digital phenomenon, a fact that sparked an unprecedented dialogue in religious circles. It was vital to highlight the questions asked, as well as the resulting technological answers, and to generate a conversation about the theological implications of the decisions made. Justine Dyikuk saw this tendency even before 2020 and it became more obvious during the pandemic: "most pastors and religious leaders were primarily focused on the pragmatic aspects of implementing technology for worship and creating technologically mediated congregations, while there was little reflection on the implications these uses could have in shaping a church's religious identity"[43]. Naturally, a number of

42 Angela W. Gorrell, *Always on (Theology for the Life of the World): Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Baker Publishing, 2019), pp. 50-52 and p. 108.

43 Digital ecclesiology refers to the church of the 21st century that uses innovations of new information and communication technologies for effective communication of the Gospel. Digital ecclesiology is a branch of cyber-theology that systematically influences the digital age in the various dimensions of people's lives in a constantly changing envi-

church leaders focused their attention on the pragmatic aspects of doing church online. This included asking which online platform is ideal and which may be easier to learn, which technology resource is most cost-effective, and which aspect of the church service requires some format changes for live streaming. But these are not the key questions people ask themselves when looking for an online religious community. Therefore, what questions might capture the attention of religious leaders regarding the impact of the use of technologies on public worship, but also regarding the preferences of lay members?

4. Six Values of Online Faith Communities during the Pandemic

As far back as the 1990s, Heidi Campbell, a professor of communication and specialist in digital religion, identified six essential needs of Christian users in the study that forms the basis of her 2005 book.[44] These are: the sense of relationship, the search for care shown by others, the desire for value or appreciation, the need for 24/7 connection, the need to communicate openly and be themselves, and the need to be with those of the same faith. Following a multi-year research in Anglo-Saxon countries on two continents, Campbell found that people most valued these six specific communication traits when they navigate in online religious spaces or virtual communities.

While digital technologies have changed over the past decades, one thing that hasn't changed is what people are looking for when they go online to experience a Christian community or church. First, they are looking for a sense of belonging – not just a place to share information, but a space that allows them to form a network of social relationships and friendships. As one interviewee said, "What I experience on the Internet is true Christian relationship...(it) makes all that is supposed to be the Bride of Christ achievable, a reality...not just something that one can only read about".

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ronment. Cf. Justine John Dyikuk's article, *Setting the Parameters for a Post-Pandemic Era Church*, in the above cited book *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation on Church & Technology in a Post-Pandemic World*, full discussion on p. 3-32. Of course, the ecclesial identity is given not only by the measures implemented by the leaders, but by a number of other factors, including the ways in which the laity are involved in the life of the community.

44 Heidi A. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

Secondly, they seek attention, a space where they can give and receive support and encouragement. A lawyer in the state of Michigan reported the following: "I had an online communication where I felt really 'hugged' when I really needed it."

Third, they seek recognition of value, to be appreciated for their contributions and online presence. A man from the United Kingdom involved in an online Anglican community described his experience as follows: "I tried to leave the group three times but I always rejoined because I miss the people, I miss the jokes and I miss the way they encourage me."

Fourth, people crave connection, the ability to interact 24/7, something which the Internet easily facilitates. An accountant from Missouri involved in a prophecy study community responded, "I know that in the group, if someone says they're going to pray for me, they really will. This gives me confidence because I've seen this actually happen, whereas at church, someone may say they're going to pray for me, but I don't know if they're going to."

Fifth, people are looking online for close communication, a safe place where they can be themselves and communicate openly with others. "We were absolutely amazed at how the Holy Spirit can use something like e-mail to touch the hearts of people on the other side of the world, even to the point where they cry," said a visually impaired woman from Britain who described an online Christian group as actually being her church.

The sixth and final component is that people in online communities long to fellowship with others who share a common faith, who share their beliefs, and who share a common sense of purpose. As one Canadian man reported, "(the group) is just another expression of Jesus Christ, His church, and His call to be ministers of the gospel"[45].

In answer to these six values of Christians in online communities via the internet, religious leaders can think through strategies to develop a

45 Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, p. 181-188. The results of Dr. Campbell's research partly reflect the experiences of some of the believers with whom I interacted in the churches of Bucharest. They have appreciated the benefits of communication technologies in the pandemic and plan to use them alongside usual social interactions. Thus, although the changes brought about by the pandemic have impacted communities, worshipers can express their intention to worship and profit from the benefits of remote worship while keeping God at the center of their spiritual concerns and developing a sense of community. This can be accomplished by reimagining the means without sacrificing the purpose of worship.

digital community or to facilitate digitally mediated worship.[46] Therefore, "successful online communities and church experiences are those that cultivate social relationships and engagement on the part of their members"[47].

IV. Technological Impact on Religious Authority

Nowadays, there seems to be a loss of authority of the traditional intermediate bodies, as reliable mediators, due not necessarily to their professionalism and credibility, but rather at a time of liberation of individuals from the classic forms of mediation in favor of a direct experience of the content[48]. In this current trend, enhanced during the recent pandemic, and with faith communities adopting digital technologies in their weekly worship and faith sharing services, many witness an apparent distribution of the concept of religious authority. Campbell observes: "When online means are used for church gatherings, the authority no longer rests exclusively with the pastor, but is primarily, or at least partially, in the hands of the audience".[49] When audiences, having varying degrees of anonymity, are faced with choosing which services to watch, the choice can be influenced by many factors, including the aesthetic qualities of the presentation[50]. "Popularity, then, is a form of authority that is freely assigned by the public to people they like, find interesting, and respect"[51].

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, religious programs were recommended individually, but through technology the promotion becomes

46 See Campbell's 2020 discussion in *The Distanced Church*, p. 51 and arguments by Prof. Susan White in *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Abingdon Press, 1994).

47 Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, pp. 51-52.

48 Pietropaoli, *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems*, p. 14. See also the discussion in Bentivegna, S., & Boccia Artieri, G. (2021). *Voci della democrazia. Il futuro del dibattito pubblico* (*Voices of democracy. The future of public debate*), Il Mulino.

49 Campbell, *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation*, p. 29.

50 At this point, an unintentional gap between faith communities can result as some (in)formal leaders announce their services with the promise of introducing a special speaker or something that will be announced during the service. This may mean that some communities have new members online who may leave the program at any time, while others may lose them as long-term members. These trends have somewhat affected the actual participation or involvement of believers, as well as the very concept of being a member of the local community, even after social distancing measures were lifted.

51 Stig Hjarvard, "Mediatization and the changing authority of religion". *Media, Culture & Society*, vol 38 (1), p. 7.

much swifter, amplified and through audio-video effects, stimulating a greater number of senses. Thus, the personalized invitation or received directly from an authority figure or through a fellow believer is no longer necessary. And this can be done even easier, without any written messages, but by simply launching a forwarding command or by sending them by several clicks on the Internet.[52]

Today, many users quickly access various religious texts online and multiple versions of interpretive tools, so they no longer need to ask religious leaders for such information. As online religious communities are studied, it emerges that many tend to prefer an emergent, fluid religious experience.

Online groups tend to engage in discussions or debates about religious beliefs, while in offline settings an equivalent measure of freedom would not be afforded. Hence, there are churches and Christian institutions that have understood the need to be "more articulate about their online presence; to use not only a webmaster, but also a director of new media to handle the organization's social media presence"[53]. Apparently, online spaces offer an anonymity that Christian users might not have in a face-to-face setting, which can give them the confidence to explore their faith without the fear of ridicule or the barrier of having to enter a church's premises or walk through the doors of a local congregation.[54] This phenomenon could also be observed in Romania at the beginning of the pan-

52 In the apostolic era, the church was based on a type of communication with a low degree of mediation. According to the New Testament account, local communities revolved around the work of local and itinerant leaders: apostles, elders, and deacons. The model of the local church was translated or contextualized according to socio-cultural and religious factors, but it did not tend towards the formation of a centralized structure. In the centuries preceding the Protestant Reformation, the church distanced itself from the forms of house meetings and developed an organization with a high level of clericalism. With the Reformation, there was a partial but consistent shift in ecclesiology from a clergy-centered church to lay-centered communities.

In Protestant ecclesiology, the church is seen as that community of believers equal in role and function within an organized framework that operates on the basis of their common faith in Scripture. Lay-based community is an even more nuanced expression in the present world where lay people are less dependent on clergy to contribute to the life of the church or local community.

53 Stout, *Media and Religion*, p. 74.

54 Bryony Taylor, *Sharing Faith Using Social Media*, Grove Evangelism Series (Grove Books Limited, 2016), vol 115, p. 7.

demic: occasional online visitors began to watch service broadcasts live, observe church activities on Facebook or YouTube, and comment on them in writing. There were people who became familiar with worship because of its instant availability, services that are close at hand in their pockets or on their personal laptops.

Therefore, the online environment is a comfortable one because it intertwines relatively easily with offline life.[55] Thus, a new situation is emerging in which the discussion on the concept of traditional authority is not only welcome, but essential. In fact, the discussion is also an immediate necessity because the Internet may already represent for many users a spiritual father that allows believers to choose from a variety of "resources and experiences with which to personalize their religious conduct and beliefs"[56].

Recently, a Romanian researcher emphasized the putting into place of this permanent state of affairs through the expansion of Internet access. Instead of looking to religious leaders for spiritual guidance, people can and will search Google for spiritual guidance or simply religious content on their own. Of course, they have to use a lot of personal discernment to be able to sort through an infinite number of links and put the information in order because "the abundant information provided by Google is not even equidistant, and most of the suggestions are of course based on algorithms, and not on spiritual authority"[57].

Audiences in various developed countries are apparently undergoing changes from passive to media-producing users. With the emergence of virtual space, various virtual religious spaces have emerged in the form of "religious websites, blogs, forums and networks, as well as religious news-

55 Some users declare themselves to be online residents rather than mere visitors. For the sake of precision, this terminology is preferable to that of immigrants and digital natives. See the article by White, D.S. and Le Cornu, A. (5 September 2011), *Visitors and residents: A new typology for online engagement*. First Monday, 16(9). Available at URL: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/3171/3049. The theme is revisited in the 2017 article: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7802/6515.

56 Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, p. 72.

57 Agnos-Milian Herțeliu, «*Usages Et Pratiques Des Médias Sociaux Numériques Et Appropriation De La Culture Numérique Dans Les Organisations Semi-Fermées*» (Université Paul Valery III, 2018), unpublished thesis, p. 50.

groups"[58]. The activity of many such groups has enhanced the importance of virtual religion, which in the real world has facilitated its conversion into the everyday religion of many users, but has also increased the degree of difficulty for religious authorities to address such conditions. In some situations, exponents of ecclesial authority have actively approached virtual communities of believers in order to interact with and influence the same digital world in which many of them operate[59].

Therefore, the concept of religious authority in churches seems to be going through a period of semantic enrichment. This fact does not necessarily represent in all cases a challenge for the church authorities, but rather can translate into opportunities of discussion and negotiation of several practical aspects of leadership-laity cooperation within communities. Discussing authority definitely constitutes an immediate opportunity for Christian leaders to reflect on the appropriate reactions to the ongoing situation and how they can integrate new contexts in order to use various opportunities to serve and evangelize, offered by and within the community.

V. Conclusions

The dynamics of relationships within the Trinity points to the relational nature of the human being. The Trinity revealed personally and often relationally as God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The many ways in which the Godhead directed biblical history highlight not only divine

58 Reza Ameli Saied, professor of communication at the University of Tehran, in the article "Virtual Religion and Duality of Religious Spaces," *Asian Journal of Social Science*, no. 37 (2009), p. 214.

59 Cheong and Fischer-Nielsen conducted a study confirming that Google, Facebook and YouTube "have been integrated into the professional work of pastors. In an analysis of the results of a survey completed by 1040 pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark they found that 95% of them spend time online daily and a considerable number of them consider the Internet to have a positive influence on their work. This is significant for the study of Christian millennials because 94% of pastors who responded on the date of the study were between the ages of 25 and 39. In addition, two-thirds of respondents stated that the Internet has enabled more frequent interactions with parishioners. For a discussion of this study, see H. Cheong, *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012). Other experts argue that the Internet "through social media platforms, represents a way to renew, revive the life (and legitimacy) of religious organizations." See Stout's book, *Media and Religion*, p. 74.

condescension towards human problems, but also the mysterious and at the same time essentially relational nature of the triune God.

Given the social nature of God, many believers value their faith community in physical places of worship or in digital spaces. Many consider freedom, truth and justice as core values of the Church and even of western civilization. However, in specific contexts values as such are being reinterpreted or even negotiated for the perceived good of the individual or the group, under current trends towards a more individualistic culture.

In today's sociocultural context, church members use digital technology and the Internet in various ways and for a considerable amount of time each day, both in their daily lives and during religious services. This fact was demonstrated by the extensive use of technologies in the context of the pandemic, in the absence of an alternative to meeting in physical format.

Following multiple churches online during the pandemic, many official leaders were seen preaching and praying from pulpits in the middle of empty buildings. At the same time, some have explored new methods of worship or organized people into groups, giving various adults and youth the responsibility to lead and encourage meaningful interactions. During the pandemic, many Christians have endured information overload, searching for meaningful social connections and online content that reflects their Christian beliefs. Thus, communities began to capitalize on opportunities to experience online new ways of being and experiencing church life.

At the same time, a significant number of lay members expressed their desire to preserve meaningful relationships in the community, drawing inspiration from the Holy Scriptures in their search for creative ways to manifest and interact with fellow believers.

The church should, of course, continue to use technology imaginatively for its various strands of community ministry, but it must always do so in a theologically prudent and principled manner. Online religious activities and networks will continue, but should be seen as supplementing the church's offline efforts to express Christian values.

Digital tools have limitations and some forms of media use can certainly affect the health of users, but it is essential that church leaders begin to seek God's guidance in discerning what it means to faithfully cultivate biblical values in a transforming participatory media culture.

Under the new circumstances, local faith communities should reflect on the ways in which their religious identity is impacted and expressed in different social circumstances and the Romanian culture as a whole.

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